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ANYTHING

BUT
HOLLYWOOD



THE TRAVELOGUE FILM • AMATEUR FILMMAKING IN SAN DIEGO
DIGITAL PRODUCTION AT USC • CARMELO BENE • ALMODÓVAR
DETRITUS CINEMA • HENRY FOOL • INTERVIEW WITH EDWARD YANG
EARLY CHINESE CINEMA AND HOLLYWOOD • AND FOR THE FIRST
TIME, A COMPLETE INDEX TO EVERY ISSUE OF CINEACTION 1 TO 46

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THE COLLECTIVE

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THE CANADA COUNCIL
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ANYTHING BUT HOLLYWOOD

The topic for this issue arose initially from a sense of exasperation with what I've perceived as an increasingly homogenized and narrow range of 'commercial product' emanating from our neighbour to the south. If this theme had been proposed a few years earlier, my guess is that most of the papers submitted for consideration would have dealt with the American independent film. However, and surprisingly, only one of the submissions was actually concerned with a genuine American independent—Hal Hartley's *Henry Fool*—and that piece by Sarah Phillips questions the writer/director's venture into accessibility. As with the avant-garde artist's conundrum: how to remain critical while seeking for/achieving success in a society that treats criticism as just another style to be commodified, the independent filmmaker seems to share a similar perplexing and confounding situation. The question is: How to challenge the system when the system seems to be eminently adaptable to collapsing everything to a matter of style over substance. Suddenly, Independent Film has gone mainstream!

On the other hand, I was delighted to discover that there was serious work being done on alternate modes of production, distribution and exhibition—subjects, especially the latter two, that rarely have been dealt with inside the covers of *CineAction*. From the University of Southern California, a training ground for mainstream commercial filmmaking, Charles Tashiro writes about the possibilities and practicalities of digital video production, explaining and assessing a project that he did with a small group of students, half of whom were not film majors. While digital video solves some of the production problems of would-be filmmakers, it doesn't address the difficulty of distribution and exhibition, i.e. getting the films seen. Two papers in this issue investigate modes of alternate filmmaking which seem to have solved those problems. Jeffrey Ruoff takes as his almost ethnographic interest the little studied (amateur) travelogue film industry, unfamiliar to most filmgoers, but of some considerable cultural and historical importance for the way in which it has functioned as an alternative to the commercial fiction film that is Hollywood's sole product. Travelogue filmmakers not only produce the films themselves, functioning in all capacities of production, but also take the films around an established circuit where they present them in performance, interacting with the audience. Melinda Stone's short piece opens up a somewhat related area of investigation, its focus being the San Diego Amateur Movie club.

In a vein more recognizable to *CineAction* readers, there are two papers that deal with avant-garde practices: Marc Siegel's piece on an Italian experimental theatre director, Carmelo Bene, who made a brief crossover into film in the late sixties and early seventies; and Scott Mackenzie's article on some tendencies in current avant-garde film which reject the formalist concerns of the earlier avant-garde for a more critical engagement with history and politics. In addition, Brian K. Aurand's article on Pedro Almodóvar looks at the ways in which the Spanish director challenges the codes and conventions of mainstream commercial film by using pornographic tropes in non-pornographic films.

The last two articles deal with issues of production, distribution and exhibition in two non-Western countries, China and Taiwan. Ying Zhu's piece is a finely detailed historical account of the first wave of Chinese commercial cinema; its response to the influx and domination of American films in the silent era, and the development of mainland production studios in the late twenties and thirties. Edward Yang, one of the foremost Taiwanese 'New Wave' directors, discusses his development as a filmmaker (he spent a year at USC!), the state of filmmaking in Taiwan today, and some of his films in an interview conducted this past year by Shelly Kraicer and Lisa Roosen-Runge at a retrospective held in Chicago.

And finally, as an aid to our readers, this issue contains a complete index of all of our prior issues, complete with title and author of every article ever published in *CineAction*. I would like to thank Evan Wargon for taking the time to input the information, create a database, and assemble the index in the state in which it's being published. He now knows more about *CineAction* than any of the rest of us.

Susan Morrison

Submissions are welcome for upcoming issues:

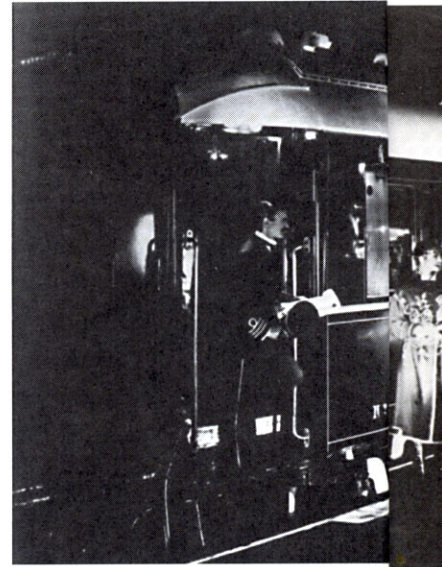
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“We are the last of the vaudevillians. We go from town to town, set up our projectors, our sound systems, do our shows, and then drive on.”

John Holod, travelogue filmmaker, March 1998

Around the World in Eighty Minutes

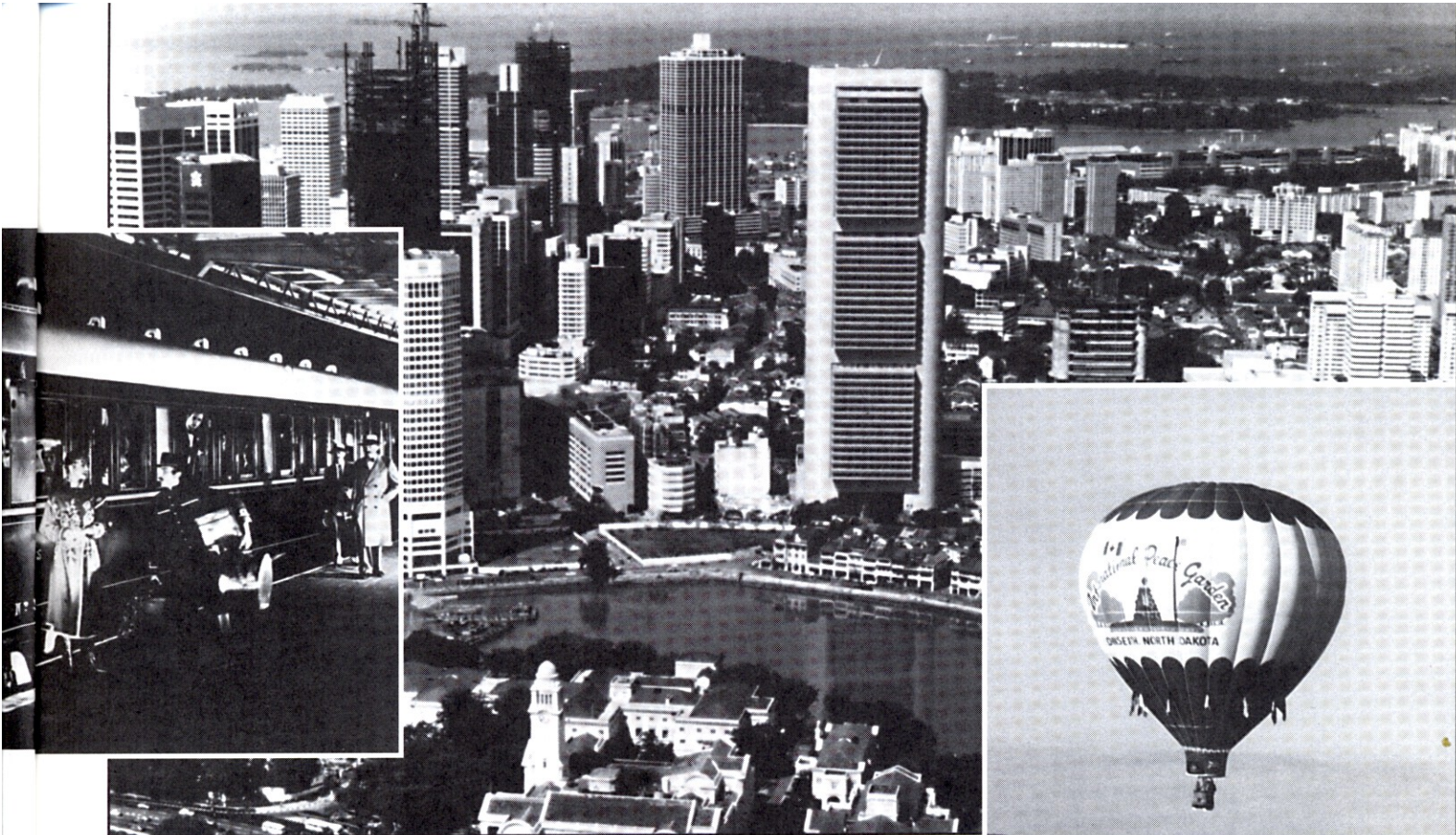
The Travel Lecture Film



by **Jeffrey Ruoff**

Film history should be about all aspects of the medium, not simply those of the dominant cinema. Promoting only documentary or avant-garde alternatives, however, further marginalizes other forms, such as newsreels, educational films, and industrials. My current interest is the travel lecture film, which I see as the archetypal form of the travelogue in cinema.¹ This is the world of itinerant film lecturers who present silent travelogues with live narration. At present, I am studying a corpus of 284 feature films in distribution, produced by forty-eight filmmakers, of whom I have met perhaps half. I have attended over thirty live travelogue screenings.² Travel lectures take place at hundreds of venues across North America, including museums (the Portland Art Museum), concert halls (the San Diego Symphony Hall), universities (the University of Colorado-Boulder), and community clubs (the Kodak Camera Club of Rochester, New York).

The travel lecture film formed an important part of early cinema, flourished in later years, and continues today, notwithstanding predictions of its demise in the age of television, virtual reality, and the Internet. Despite continuities with early cinema, the travel lecture film remains a little-studied genre. Because it involves a live performance, it cannot be analyzed apart from its idiosyncratic screenings. As Thayer Soule eloquently puts it in his autobiography *On the Road With Travelogues, 1935-1995*, a travelogue “lives only when the producer and his audience are together.”³ As such, they leave few historical traces. In addition, from the late 1930s to the 1970s, lecturers projected their camera original — Kodachrome positive film — until the prints disintegrated.⁴ As the colors of the camera original are extraordinarily vivid, and the cost of prints considerable, some producers still follow this practice today. Kodachrome positive prints are one-of-a-kind works, like daguerreotypes, that cannot adequately be replicated. Nowadays, even those producers who shoot negative film rarely make more than



one or two release prints. As a result, few such travelogues survive, and fewer still have been archived. The historical invisibility of the travel lecture film is most evident in its total exclusion from film history books. David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson make no mention of the genre in their 800-page *Film History* (1994).

Most research on alternative film production and exhibition practices has been limited to the early decades of cinema. While a recent issue of *Iris: A Journal of Theory on Image and Sound*, edited by André Gaudreault and Germain Lacasse, focuses on the film lecturer, all 300 pages are devoted to the early cin-

1. Although the travelogue is a staple of motion pictures, its importance is not reflected in the literature of film studies. In my manuscript-in-progress on the travel film experience, *Being There: Notes on the Travelogue*, I analyze travel lecture films (*Cuba at the Crossroads*, *Return to Sweden*), documentaries (*Land Without Bread*, *Sherman's March*), ethnographic films (*By Aeroplane to Pygmyland*, *Cannibal Tours*), experimental movies (*Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, *From the Pole to the Equator*), IMAX productions (*Tropical Rainforest*, *Everest*), and feature films (*2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Lisbon Story*).

2. "Around the World in Eighty Minutes" is an interim report, part of an ongoing investigation of live travelogues. It is based on public screenings, professional literature, fieldwork, and interviews. (All quotes not otherwise attributed come from screenings I attended and interviews I conducted in Oregon, Washington, Nevada, New York, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Florida.) I would like to thank the many filmmakers, exhibitors, and audience members who shared their passion for travelogues with me. Special thanks are due producer John Holod, who invited me into his (motor) home for two weeks during his 1997-1998 lecture tour, and Portland promoter Alan Jones who introduced me to local audience members and lent me photographs, flyers, and posters. Mari Ray of Kamen Film Productions generously provided production stills. I am grateful to Susan Morrison, Tom Doherty, Dirk Eitzen, and Karel Dibbets for comments on this essay.

3. Thayer Soule, *On the Road With Travelogues, 1935-1995: A 60-Year Romp* (Seattle, WA: Peanut Butter Publishing 1997), 136-7.

4. Gene Wiancko, "40 Years in Travelogues," *Travelogue: The International Film Magazine* 19.2 (1996), 21.



Buddy Hatton's *The Eastern and Orient Express*

Thayer Soule's *Singapore to Bali*

John Holod's *Adventure Along the U.S./ Canadian Border*

John Holod's *Czechoslovakia*



ema period. In their introduction, the editors claim that the lecturer has “definitively disappeared.”⁵ And yet the city of Montreal, where Gaudreault works, boasts a remarkable travelogue booking agency which celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1997. Les Grands Explorateurs presents travel lecture films with live French-language narration in forty-four different venues throughout Quebec. The 1997-98 season included such titles as *Visages d’Australie* and *Parfums de Chine*.

The live travelogue’s show-and-tell characteristics have remained remarkably consistent over the past century. The most important is the presence of the filmmaker who addresses the audience directly from the stage. A travel lecture offers a “non-fiction drama of people and places, true but dramatized,” as one viewer put it, extending the opportunity to “visit vicariously someplace you can’t afford to visit yourself.” An audience member in Oregon volunteered another definition, “A travelogue is a story about a far away place — it doesn’t have to be far away, yet that seems appropriate — that presents a variety of information about a culture, in an interesting, perhaps unique way.”

Many current performers trace their origins to Burton Holmes, who gave over 8,000 illustrated travel lectures, using slides and, later, motion pictures, from the 1890s to the 1950s.⁶ Different approaches within the live travelogue include comedy, wildlife, history, and tourist emphases. John Holod, who uses slapstick routines and vaudeville humor, exemplifies the comic approach and continues the tradition of his idols Don Cooper and Stan Midgley. John Wilson prefers to explore the natural world in such movies as *Iceland: Europe’s Wild Gem*, while Robin Williams uses historical figures for works such as *Amadeus*, *A Traveler in Italy*. Others, including Grant Foster and Buddy Hatton, stick to the well-trodden path and highlight enduring tourist sites. Harder to classify is the “travel the-

ater” of Howdee Meyers and Lucia Perrigo in *The Magnificent World of the Mountain King: Ludwig II’s Bavarian Castles* or the absurd humor of William Stockdale in travelogues such as *Cemeteries Are Fun*.

Travelogue lecturers are cultural brokers, translators, and interpreters for American audiences. As a measure of their significance, 16mm live travelogues play to greater numbers of people than many foreign features and undoubtedly most avant-garde films. More Americans probably saw Frank Klicar’s travel lecture film *The Yugoslav Republics* than Emir Kusturica’s *Underground* (1995). At the moment, there are at least thirty full-time travelogue filmmakers in North America while, to my knowledge, no such full-time ethnographic filmmakers exist here at all. There is an established travel lecture circuit;⁷ John Holod has dates booked through the year 2000.

The 16mm travelogue industry, in its current configuration, bears remarkable similarities with the production, distribution, and exhibition of motion pictures at the beginning of the 20th century.⁸ Individual filmmakers are involved in all facets of the business. Exhibition venues are not uniform and often serve multiple functions. The principal sound accompaniment comes from a live performer in the theater and, correspondingly, varies from show to show. Travel lecturers are not celebrities and the films are not usually structured around their personalities, as was the case with the films of Martin and Osa Johnson.⁹ Not only are there no stars in live travelogues, there are frequently no characters at all. Like early cinema, the emphasis is on actuality footage and scenics. Similarly, it is difficult to date travel lecture films. When projected in theaters, many do not have printed titles or credits. Producers have a vested interest in deliberately *not* dating their films. When I saw Charlie Hartman present *The Sunny South of France* in 1996, I was led to believe the film was new. However, a 1988



The Cathedral in Milan from Robin Williams' *Amadeus*, a Traveler in Italy

A sampan from Frank M. Klicar's *Hong Kong*

Mount Cook from Grant Foster's *New Zealand: an Outdoor Adventure*

Indian women at the village of San Antonio Palopo, Lake Guatemala, from Sandy Mortimer's *Belize and Guatemala: Legacy of the Maya*

advertisement in *Travelogue: The International Travel Film Magazine* indicates the film is at least a decade old.

In venues across North America, travel lecturers enjoy face-to-face contact with their audiences. As Sandy Mortimer, the president of the International Motion Picture and Lecturers Association (IMPALA) said, "If you make a program for television, no one knows your name. When you stand in front of an audience, you are the name above the title." While life on the travelogue circuit may be rewarding, it is not easy. A successful producer typically stays in hotels 250 nights a year. One lecturer, recently retired, flew his own plane to his performances. Most travel by car, driving hundreds of miles between shows. Thayer Soule, who apprenticed with Burton Holmes before pursuing his own career, averaged 33,000 miles a year from 1958-1995.¹⁰ In the end, they spend more time touring cities and towns in America than they do visiting the countries shown in their films.

After a few years lecturing on the road, tired of motels and roadside restaurants, producer John Holod bought a mobile home. He now lives and tours in this \$80,000 vehicle — with satellite TV, VCR, global positioning system, personal computer, films, videos, promotional materials, projectors, and tuxedos — giving over 100 presentations a year. (I accompanied him for two weeks in March 1998 as he presented *Cuba at the Crossroads* on tour from New York to Florida.) His motor home is a movie theater and motion picture studio on wheels. When the 1997-98 lecture season ended, Holod headed north to Alaska to shoot the footage for his next feature *The Last Great Road Trip*.

Mode of Production: The Total Filmmaker

Travelogue producers are independent entrepreneurs who produce, shoot, record sound, edit, distribute, exhibit, and

narrate 16mm movies. Most are Americans of European origin, with university degrees from schools such as the University of Southern California, Stanford University, and Harvard University. Many have had experience in the print, radio, television, and film industries. Like their audience members, many lecturers are over sixty years old. Of the forty-eight filmmakers currently active, only two women independently produce and present films. While there are few women travel lecturers, many wives assist in the production process and manage the careers of their filmmaker husbands, handling bookings, publicity, and occasionally mixing sound on the lecture tours.¹¹ Producers do not regard learning other languages as a prerequisite to making travelogues. A Canadian filmmaker admitted in his essay "Why the Ukraine?" that the only word he knew of the local language was "*Kanada*."¹² Another described filming in China in the early 1980s "with sign language and a good phrase book."¹³ Even with exceptional ability and the best of intentions, who could learn the languages of the thirty or more countries in which Thayer Soule made travel movies?¹⁴

Travelogues are shot by small crews, often only a few people or a husband-and-wife team, occasionally a lone filmmaker. Location shooting typically takes place during June, July, and August. (There are no screenings during the summer, when it is presumed that travelogue audiences themselves are on the road.) Most travelogues are shot with lightweight 16mm spring-wound or battery-powered cameras; few producers record sound in the field. The average shooting ratio for an eighty-minute feature is five to one. Most travel lecturers scorn video; one longtime producer referred to the VCR as "an abomination."¹⁵ Despite their disdain, however, many lecturers now sell videotape copies of their works, mostly at the screenings, but also by mail order. (These tapes

5. André Gaudreault and Germain Lacasse, eds. *The Moving Picture Lecturer. IRIS: A Journal of Theory on Image and Sound* N. 22 Fall (1996), 15.

6. Irving Wallace, "Everybody's Rover Boy" in Genoa Caldwell, ed. *Burton Holmes: The Man Who Photographed the World* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. [1947] 1978), 11. During the 1993-1994 lecture season, there were numerous centennial celebrations of Holmes' presentation of what these producers consider the "first travelogue." Cf., "100 Years of Travelogues," *Travelogue: The International Film Magazine* 17.2 (1994), 8.

7. Annual meetings of the International Travel and Adventure Film Guild bring together exhibitors, filmmakers, and booking agencies. INTRAFILM is the umbrella organization of the industry, comprised of the Professional Travelogue Sponsors (PTS) and the International Motion Picture and Lecturers Association (IMPALA). The IMPALA film festival allows directors to preview new work for exhibitors. My research on live travelogues began at the INTRAFILM convention, December 6-8, 1997, in Las Vegas.

8. Tom Gunning, "Early American Film" in John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, eds. *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 258-262.

9. Tom Doherty, "The Age of Exploration: The Hollywood Travelogue Film," *Cineaste* January (1994), 38.

10. Soule, op. cit. 178.

11. "Meet Joan Lark," *Travelogue: The International Film Magazine* 15.2 (1992), 49.

12. Bob Willis, "Why the Ukraine? Filmmaker Accompanies Immigrant Group to Homeland," *Travelogue: The International Film Magazine* 20.1 (1997), 16.

13. Raphael Green, "Adventures of an Old China Hand," *Travelogue: The International Film Magazine* 19.1 (1996), 23.

14. Soule, op. cit. 246.

15. Don Cooper, "Dear Coop," *Travelogue: The International Film Magazine* 19.2 (1996) 36.

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include recorded voice-over narration, music, and effects that approximate the sound of the live presentations.) For many producers, video sales make the difference between profit and loss.

The initial run of a travel lecture film is about three to four years, though it may remain in distribution considerably longer. When marketing their works to potential exhibitors, travel filmmakers are anxious to point out the newness of their footage. As the director of *China: The Middle Kingdom* asserted at the 1997 IMPALA film festival, "There are no whiskers on this film; it was shot only six months ago." Given the initial investment, however, producers are inevitably drawn back to film in the same regions, a process that encourages updating films. For example, a director with *Hong Kong* in his catalogue may shoot additional footage during the transition to mainland Chinese rule and then market a new film under a similar title. As a result, the sounds and the images of individual films evolve over time.

Exhibition and Audiences: Variety is the Rule

Travel lecture films are exhibited in the widest possible array of venues, including libraries, museums, service clubs, universities, high schools, institutes, and concert halls. John Holod said that he might play a 900-seat auditorium with a full house, spotlight, projectionist, and changing room one evening, then lecture to fifty people in the basement of a school the following night, where he has to put on his tuxedo in a bathroom stall, and contend with projector noise throughout the presentation. Fees and ticket prices, too, vary. The Vassar Brothers Institute pays lecturers \$1050 per presentation; a more common figure is \$500. A season ticket for five screenings at Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina, sells for \$25, while seven shows cost \$52.50 in Portland, Oregon.

At a time when most Hollywood films are explicitly directed at young teenagers, travel lecture films reach viewers whose average age is approximately sixty. Travelogue screenings, attended by well-to-do audiences, many in formal dress, have more in common with ballet performances than with multiplex cinema experiences. As a mark of this difference, lecturers often sport tuxedos for their presentations. The audience for educational travelogues, as in the past,¹⁶ is conspicuously middle-class. A description of a 1950s audience in Santa Barbara — "elderly, wealthy, well dressed, attentive, and appreciative"¹⁷ — still holds true. An informal survey concludes that "most are professional people, i.e., doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc."¹⁸ In addition, the travelogue audience is loyal. A series at the Denver Museum of Natural History has awarded plaques to women, dubbed "Golden Girls"¹⁹, who have frequented lectures for fifty consecutive years.

As during the early cinema period, the film itself is only a portion of the evening's entertainment. A woman from the Rose Villa Retirement Home in Portland pointed out, "It's an opportunity for us to get off the grounds here. It offers camaraderie and a chance to be together." Door prizes may be awarded and presentations are frequently coupled with musical performances. Screenings at the El Camino College series

in Torrance, California have been routinely preceded by live music.²⁰ At East Carolina University, film lectures are followed by dinner parties with the cuisine of the featured country.²¹ In the end, after the door prizes have been handed out, it may matter little whether the subject of the movie was Cuba or Canada.

Individual films are always shown as part of a series of travel lectures. The Geographic Society of Chicago provides season ticket holders with a "trip around the world" that touches upon all seven continents.²² An article on "How to Start Travel Film Series" in *Travelogue* magazine offers suggestions for exhibitors, "Vary your presentations geographically. Austria and Switzerland look similar on film. So do Denmark and Sweden. Avoid such conflicts in the same season. Consider the ethnic makeup of your community."²³ Responding to a magazine survey, a promoter in Sarasota states, "We also like to give a bit of education for our season ticket holders. We think they should see a Malaysia or a Tunisia along with Germany and Switzerland."²⁴

The first travelogue screening I attended took place at an old picture palace in Portland built by the Chicago firm of Rapp and Rapp in 1928. Now renovated, this center for the performing arts seats 2800. Entering this vintage theater for a live travelogue lecture was like traveling back in time to another era of movie exhibition. Attendance the evening of March 28, 1996 was probably 1000. Unlike screenings at regular movie theaters, tickets were sold for numbered seats; an individual ticket cost \$9.75. Though the enormous theater had many empty chairs, spectators nonetheless dutifully filed towards their assigned seats. They were season ticket holders, partial to their regular places.

At the World Cavalcade series in Portland,²⁵ audience members arrive in couples or small groups of five or six. Senior citizens from retirement communities pull up in buses, well before the 7:30pm screening. Gentlemen dress in suits and ties while some women wear hats they may keep on during the screening. Considerable banter animates the auditorium as ticket holders return to familiar seats. Most travelogue presentations include intermissions when audience members stretch, chat, smoke, use the restrooms, purchase videotapes

16. Charles Musser and Carol Nelson, *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition, 1880-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989), 189.

17. Soule, op.cit. 119.

18. Maureen Ferrante, "Looking Ahead to a New Season," *The Performer: The International Magazine of Stage and Screen* 2.2 (1979), 40.

19. Lucia Perrigo, "Lines by Lucia," *Travelogue: The International Film Magazine* 17.2 (1994), 12.

20. Perrigo, Lucia, "Lines by Lucia," *Travelogue: The International Film Magazine* 18.2 (1995), 21.

21. Perrigo, Lucia, "Lines by Lucia," *Travelogue: The International Film Magazine* 19.2 (1996), 44.


22. William S. Fisher, "Enthusiasm Always Shows Through," *Travelogue: The International Film Magazine* 14.1 (1991), 28.

23. Hal McClure, "How to Start Travel Film Series," *Travelogue: The International Film Magazine* 11.2 (1988), 34.

24. "Sponsors, Artists Advise How," *The Performer: The International Magazine for Stage and Screen* 4.1 (1981), 6.

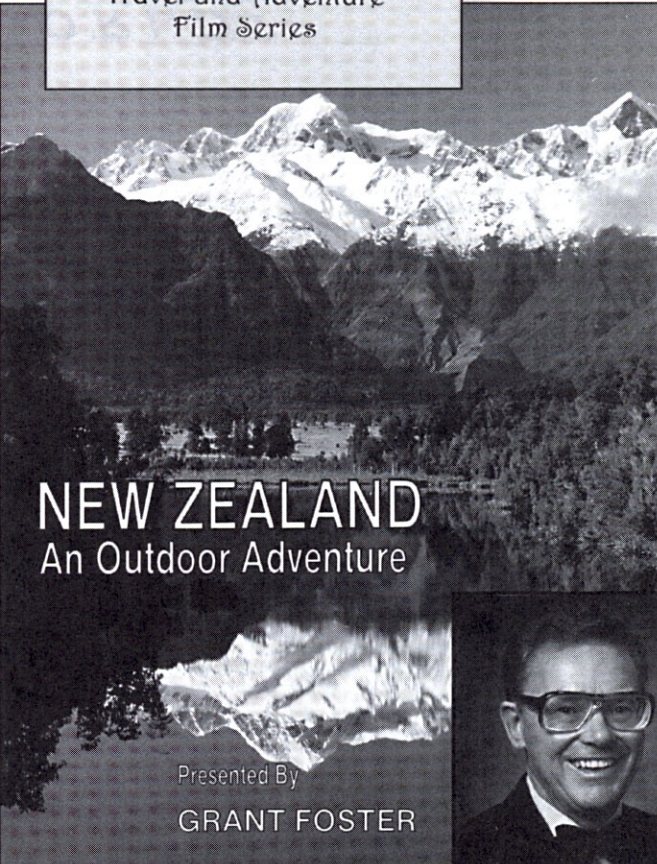
25. Interestingly, only in-person appearances by directors Michael Moore and Oliver Stone at the Portland Art Museum this year brought in audiences comparable with those at the monthly World Cavalcade travelogue series.

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and other souvenirs. At the same time, the break gives the lecturer an opportunity to rest and the projectionist time to change the 16mm reels (which, under normal circumstances, cannot run longer than forty-five minutes).

Since the filmmaker narrates the movie live, each showing resembles a Hollywood preview screening at which the producer directly gauges the audience response. As a result, there is a particularly good match between travel lectures and their public; audiences are rarely disappointed. Travelogue viewers are not in the thrall of the images and sounds, an implication often made of spectators of commercial fiction film. The presence of the narrator, as Miriam Hansen has suggested of early cinema exhibition,²⁶ breaks off this engagement. Further, live travelogues do not encourage the kind of identification and emotional involvement found in much Hollywood film.²⁷ It is not uncommon for exhibitors to leave the lights on in the auditorium for spectators to be able to read their programs (which are frequently itineraries of the sites visited). Viewers of travel lecture films prefer information over identification, discourse instead of spectacle.

The World of the Travel Lecture Film

What kind of world is constructed night after night on the travelogue circuit? Of the 284 features in my sample, the continental distribution of works is: Europe (39%), North America (26%), Asia (15%), Central and South America (9%), Australasia (5%), and Africa (4%). There are no films about Antarctica.²⁸

Among individual countries, the United States (21%) receives the greatest coverage. The United Kingdom is a distant second (6%), Canada (5%) third, Italy (3%) fourth. If counted individually, Alaska (3%) and Hawaii (3%) tie with the Russian Federation (3%), and appear more than most countries, including France (2%), Greece (2%), and Spain (2%). The most popular subjects on the Asian continent are China, Indonesia, and Israel. In South America, Peru and Brazil lead the way. In Central America, only Mexico and Costa Rica are represented more than once. In Australasia, Australia and New Zealand appear most frequently. Egypt and South Africa dominate the few films about Africa. Absent were such countries as Rumania, Bulgaria, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, Nigeria, and Somalia.

It is surprising that, unlike most ethnographic films, travel lecture films do not principally deal with so-called exotic cultures at all. Over two-thirds of those in distribution explore Europe and North America. The films about the United States favor the wilderness and the west, particularly the mythology of the frontier. Except for two movies, the entire eastern seaboard is ignored. The midwest, with no single state films, appears merely as a place to leave at the outset of *Along the Santa Fe Trail*, *The Oregon Trail*, and *The Trail: Lewis & Clark Expedition 1803-1806*.

The topic of a country suggests no automatic approach. Among the most favored, and now clichéd, is the "land of contrasts" — modern vs. traditional, rural vs. urban — which allows considerable flexibility. Most travelogues offer

a smorgasbord of local culture. A viewer in New Smyrna Beach, Florida, praised *Cuba* for its breadth, "The variety was good, a little bit of history, climate, geography, nature, the economy." Most travel lecture films endlessly catalogue facts about the locale and quantify the world in every possible way.²⁹ Exemplifying this tendency, *Across the Bering Sea* takes inventory in a tiny Alaska town, "two trees, one hotel, no traffic lights, and thirteen radio stations." One may learn many curious things from viewing travelogues, including that there are fifty-four kinds of snakes in Belize, that most of the great Gothic churches are in the north of France, and that Guatemala is about the same size as Oregon.

Despite the apparent narrative frame of the journey (departure-exploration-return), most travelogues do not represent temporally coherent voyages. Chronology exists more often as a construct of post-production; *Hong Kong in Transition* includes footage from four different trips to the city taken between 1989 and 1996. The lecture film tends to be an essay on geography or history, not a journey per se, resembling a guidebook such as Fodor's *Exploring Vietnam* (1998) rather than a travel adventure by Paul Theroux.

The travelogue lies at the intersection of the industries of travel and entertainment. "The entertainment industry delivers an experience to its customers," an analyst for *The Economist* writes, "whereas the travel industry delivers its customers to an experience."³⁰ Like organized tours, travelogues promise safe and comfortable trips, the opportunity to see the world without the difficulties of travel. Lecture films often include publicity for specific modes of transport, accommodations, and restaurants. At a screening in Portland, filmmaker Buddy Hatton thanked President Alberto Fujimori for making Peru safe for tourism. Hatton admitted that in the past it was dangerous to visit, but now, "Don't hesitate to go." Some producers also lead tours, a profession which parallels their film lecturing, while sponsors often promote series through offers of free trips.³¹ In 1996-97, a Portland agency coordinated its tours with films offered by the World Cavalcade travelogue series. World Travelcade offered group tours of Mexico, Alaska, Peru, France, Scotland, Costa Rica, and Vietnam/Burma, the very countries shown in the travelogues of the previous season. A publicity brochure noted that, "The mysterious land of the Inca is well explored by Buddy Hatton in *Peru: The Mysterious Journey*, and by you if you sign up for the tour following in Mr. Hatton's steps." So, the director's comment to his audience — "You might be tired after the long boat trip and prefer to take a short nap upon arrival" — was not simply rhetorical.

Some travelogues are shot on tours. Reviewing the climate of Indonesia, its population and linguistic diversity, Grant Foster concluded, "The ideal way to see both Java and Bali is to take an overland tour by air-conditioned coach."³² This tour was the basis for his film *Java to Bali: Overland*. Any reputable travelogue will feature as many modes of transportation as possible, not only in the image, but also, of course, as ways of representing movement. *Adventure Along the U.S./Canadian Border* includes POV shots taken from a train, hot air balloon, river boat, dog sled, wagon train, canoe,

freighter, plane, and automobile. During a seminar at the School of American Research, anthropological filmmaker David MacDougall jokingly suggested a definition of ethnographic film as "a film in which a goat is killed." Similarly, one could say that a travel lecture film is not quite itself without an antique train ride. Some, such as *Antique Trains of Europe*, *The Great Canadian Train Ride*, and *The Eastern and Oriental Express*, feature little else.

Travelogue Structure: The Detour

Recent work on early cinema has stressed the importance of the train in the development of film narrative.³³ Indeed, it has been argued that the structure of classical narrative resembles the linear movement of train travel. In an article in *Film History*, I suggested that amateur movies and the automobile offer an alternative to this linearity.³⁴ Most travelogues advance, halt, double back, digress, and generally meander across the landscape. If the train is the figurative engine of classical Hollywood, then the automobile is the figure of the travel lecture film. The travelogue is episodic, the detour its most characteristic narrative device. Consider the breakdown, provided by the filmmaker, of sequences in the first twenty minutes of *Belize and Guatemala: Legacy of the Maya*, 1) "Belize City, founded by pirates in the seventeenth century," 2) "St. John's Anglican Cathedral, oldest in Central America," 3) "The largest unbroken reef in the Western Hemisphere," 4) "Ambergris Key, largest of the dozens of small islands along the reef," 5) "the ancient Maya city of Altun Ha," 6) "Belize Zoo, home of a family of jaguars," 7) "Danagrige and the largest settlement of Garifuna people," and 8) "Cocoa and chocolate processing." Jorge Luis Borges could not have dreamed up a richer, more imaginative, list.

The actual focus of a travel film may not be obvious from the title. *Ukraine*, for example, opens with scenes of the newly independent country, as might be expected. But it quickly detours to tell the story of Ukrainian immigrants to Canada and Ukrainian festivals there. In addition, while in the vicinity of one such festival, the director then takes audience members to see the world's largest Easter egg, just "fifty miles away." There is a radical empiricism in the travelogue; links between scenes are fortuitous, and seem to be governed by

happenstance, rather than by narrative continuity.

Along the Santa Fe Trail, despite historical associations, contains many unanticipated sequences. The viewer, perhaps accustomed to a Ken Burns-like animation of the past through readings of letters, sumptuous landscapes, and black-and-white photographs, is instead treated to a series of visits to interpretive centers and museums in Missouri, Kansas, and further west. The film opens in Independence, Missouri, with references to immigration in the 1800s, but then shifts abruptly to the story of Harry Truman's 1948 election and subsequent administration. (Independence is the birthplace

26. Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1991), 142.

27. In contrast to travel lecture films, IMAX widescreen and 3-D travelogues (like many Hollywood movies) thrive on visceral sensations of movement and sound combined with extraordinary vistas.

28. For the sake of this country by country designation, I have excluded from my sample twenty-eight thematically-organized or transcontinental films, such as *Great Quotations from Great Locations* and *Christopher Columbus: The Discovery of the New World*.

29. Buñuel's *Las Hurdes* (1932) parodies many aspects of live travelogues. For a detailed comparison, see my forthcoming essay, "An Ethnographic Surrealist Film: Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread*," in *Visual Anthropology Review* 14.1 (Spring/Summer 1998).

30. Mark Roberts, "Dream Factories: A Survey of Travel and Tourism," *The Economist* January 10 (1998), unpaginated supplement.

31. Lucia Perrigo, "Lines by Lucia," *Travelogue: The International Film Magazine* 18.2 (1995), 33.

32. Grant Foster, "Adventure in the East Indies, Beyond the Java Sea," *Travelogue: The International Film Magazine* 14.1 (1991), 12.

33. Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1997).

34. Jeffrey Ruoff, "Forty Days Across America: Kiyooka Eiichi's 1927 Travelogues," *Film History* 4.3 (Spring 1991), 243-49.



Tobacco worker from
John Holod's *Cuba*

Butterfly net
fishermen from
Dr. Dwayne L. Merry's
Mexico

of Truman.) Further along the trail, in Abilene, Kansas, the birthplace of Dwight Eisenhower, there is a similar, digressive, recapitulation of *his* political career. Although this hints at a new structural pattern, the narrative is subsequently hijacked by a sequence on tornadoes. All this in the first twelve minutes.

The producer of *Hong Kong in Transition* deliberately splits his travel documentary into two distinct parts, structured around the intermission. In the first half, the film describes the local culture, with modest restaurants, herbal medicine shops, and the like. This anthropological emphasis ends when director Frank Klicar comments, "That's it for the Chinese culture of Hong Kong. What will YOU be doing when YOU get to Hong Kong? We'll discuss that when we come back after a 10-minute intermission." The second half of the film then focuses on tourism in the city, luxury hotels, a "Middle Kingdom theme park," and the Happy Valley Race Track, among other standard destinations.

The narrative arrangement of the travel lecture film has more in common with what John Fell calls the "motivated link" in early cinema³⁵ than with the question-and-answer story structure of classical narrative. Relations of space and time are not subordinated to narrative causality, as Bordwell has argued is the case with classical Hollywood film.³⁶ Although travel lecture films usually last about eighty minutes, they could be any length. As with a music hall performance, the order of scenes could be swapped with similar results. Individual sequences do not advance a story, but, instead, add layers to the original conception. Live travelogues jump from one place to another in almost random fashion. The transitions between sequences in *Belize and Guatemala* — often as little set up as "just over this mountain range" or "only 10 miles down the coast" — sooner recall the intertitles of Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* / *An Andalusian Dog*, (1929) than the cause-and-effect of Hollywood narrative.

Return to Sweden, as the title suggests, promises an exploration of the filmmaker's roots in Scandinavia. It opens with family gravestone markers in Texas. This personal angle, however, quickly disappears as the film takes on all the traits of a customary travelogue. It is only shortly before intermission — after touring Volvo and Hasselblad factories, typical villages, national parks, and an iron mine — that director Dale Johnson picks up this personal thread and remarks that he wanders the seaside still not knowing the origins of his ancestors. (Small wonder, given his peregrinations.) After a visit to an immigration museum in the second reel, the filmmaker takes a classic travelogue detour, "It would be a couple of weeks before I could visit my ancestral home, so I went to film some glass blowing." Although he eventually finds distant relatives and his great-grandfather's old farmhouse, the feature-length movie includes, at most, ten minutes directly related to this family quest.

When I started this study, I assumed that, similar to many ethnographic films made by North Americans, travel lecture films would magnify cultural differences by depicting bizarre and possibly inexplicable customs, a perspective that has been

called "orientalism" in other contexts. To my surprise, while this element exists, it is hardly a dominant trend. It is much more likely that audience members will hear a lecture about Martin Luther and the rise of Protestantism than they will musings about "primitives" or "the inscrutable east." Further, the travel lecture film is, as often as not, an *affirmation* of ethnicity, as the case of *Return to Sweden* implies. As noted above, *Ukraine* spends considerable time at ethnic Ukrainian festivals in Canada. Further, it turns out that the Ukrainian footage was shot on a group tour of "Canadian Ukrainians looking for their roots."³⁷ John Holod's fall 1997 brochure, which includes a description of his film *Czech/Slovakia: Land of Beauty and Change*, advertises guided "Heritage Tours to Czech and Slovakia" with a company that promises "personalized visits to your ancestral home" and boasts of an eighty percent success rate at finding living relatives of tour members.

Live Performances: The Lecturer as Go-Between

Travel lecture spectators evidently still enjoy the combination of human presence and moving imagery. A Florida exhibitor compared live screenings favorably with travel programs in other media, "People go up to the travel lecturers and ask 'Where should I stay?,' 'When is the best time of the year to go?,' 'How is the food?,' and that kind of thing. You don't get that on a movie screen, you don't get that on television." In-person presentation mirrors the live travelogue's emphasis on pre-industrial forms and suggests a nostalgia for the cinema before the coming of sound.

Travel lecturers always give introductions before their films. As a projectionist in Hickory, North Carolina, stated, "The spectrum of their personalities varies dramatically. Some are really low-key. They approach it as if they are showing home movies: 'This is where we went in Cozumel, or, here's an interesting beach in Portugal.' But with others, it's just show business. They come on with a ruffled shirt and a tuxedo, they tell a couple of jokes, and it's like a nightclub act." John Holod's opening monologue at the Vassar Brothers Institute screening of *Cuba* on March 4, 1998 included jokes about Fidel Castro, exploding cigars, Pope John Paul II, and Monica Lewinsky.

Most lecturers try to include a few references to the region where the film is being presented, a technique, common to live performers, used to foster a sense of community. Paradoxically, the filmmakers mediate the motion picture medium, rather than the other way around. They speak directly to their audiences as fellow travelers, "Those of you who have been to Hong Kong will agree with me that it has the best food in the world." At a screening in Portland, a lecturer jokingly chastised two patrons for arriving ten minutes late. One producer introduced his presentation with the remark, "The more I travel, the more grateful I am to be an American." And, after a pause, he added, "God bless America." Applause followed. In the past, it was not unusual for screenings to begin with the Pledge of Allegiance or the National Anthem.³⁸ The travel lecturer personalizes the anonymous, but common, "voice of God" narration that often

accompanies documentaries on television.³⁹ In travelogue presentations, the volume varies as the speaker glances at the screen, checks his or her notes, moves towards and away from the microphone. Lecturers occasionally laugh with the audience at their own jokes. Several husband-and-wife pairs offer a novel style of tag-team narration, alternating sections of the film. Although generally using a low-tech process, lecturers have elaborate techniques for managing a live mix of sound effects and music along with the voice. Most use music and effects tracks on cassette and manipulate a portable tape recorder from the podium. Others have optical sound-on-film prints and use a wireless transmitter which allows them to control the volume setting on the projector from the stage.

It is a convention of the travelogue that the lecturer filmed the country represented. By and large, it is so, and the rhetoric of film presentation relies on personal anecdotes, first-hand information, and eye-witness accounts (as does ethnographic writing, I might add). However, films are occasionally narrated by lecturers who did not shoot the images. John Holod learned the technique of film presentation by accompanying veteran Dick Massey on the lecture circuit in 1989 with *New Zealand/Red Sea: Above and Below* and *Along the Mexican Border: California to Texas*. Each evening, the young apprentice learned a passage of the narration, which he read live from behind the screen, until, bit by bit, he had memorized both shows. Eventually, when Massey retired in mid-season, Holod took over the presentations, paying fees for the rights to the films. Needless to say, the young lecturer then presented the films as if he had taken them, later splicing in footage of himself to further personalize the movies. For the rest of the season, Holod lectured about places he had never been. Though remarkable today, such a pose would not have been unusual in 19th century lantern slide shows, "Sets of views accompanied by readings could be acquired from any major lantern firm and could be used by even the most untravelled to present lantern exhibitions."⁴⁰

Lecturers rarely flaunt foreign language competency, typically presenting themselves on a trip that any audience member might easily take. Similarly, native speakers are rarely heard as such speech is almost always filtered through the voice of the filmmaker. Although the delivery is typically quite polished, lecturers still occasionally make off-the-cuff remarks, unwittingly stumble over passages, excuse or repeat themselves, features that recall home movie screenings rather than TV programs. Many recite from memory, others consult notes. It is difficult to capture in print the charms and idiosyncrasies of live narration. Speaking of social structure in Central America, the producer of *Belize and Guatemala* stated in Portland that "the Mayan are on the lowest class of the rung." In the middle of a screening of *New Zealand: An Outdoor Adventure*, the speaker interrupted his narration to politely ask of the projectionist, "Could we have the focus check, please?"

Clearly, the apparatus of cinema is displayed and acknowledged in the typical travelogue presentation. In some venues, such as those used by Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, the projector is visible and audible in the back of the hall. Recognizing

that their audience includes many amateur photographers and would-be cinematographers, producers may explain how they obtained particularly remarkable footage. In addition, there has been a proliferation of films about travel filmmaking recently, as elderly lecturers have produced works such as *Adventure Filming the World*, *The Great American Travelogue: The Story of Travel Adventure Filmmakers*, and *The First Fifty Years*. This reflexive turn has perhaps been fueled by a growing sense of the live travelogue as a dying form. At the same time, such retrospective works also offer an opportunity for producers to recycle old footage, obtaining greater return on the initial investment.

There is a subversive, quasi avant-garde current working in the travel film lecture field, usually under the guise of humor and parody. So, for example, "the holiest of holy pilgrimages" in Bill Stockdale's *Pilgrimage Across Europe* turns out to be the golf course at St. Andrew's in Scotland. This anarchic spirit also appears in his macabre *Cemeteries Are Fun*. (Portland exhibitor Alan Jones decided not to book this film, explaining, "A lot of our audience is elderly people. I don't know about having them look at gravestones for eighty minutes.") The same producer even made a film worthy of Andy Warhol, called *The Ride*, a U.S. cross-country tour shot entirely through the windshield of his car.

The travel lecture film comprises a full-fledged industry, with filmmakers, booking agencies, exhibitors, and audiences in the millions. This industry presents intriguing parallels with early cinema, vaudeville, and home movies, all deserving of additional analysis. As virtually nothing has been written about post-war travelogues, this article provides an overview of film style and mode of production as a way of opening up discussion in the field. Numerous questions about travel lecture films — their ideological effects, their role in constructing cultural identities, their nostalgia for pre-industrial forms, their future survival — await further study.

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35. John Fell, "Motive, Mischief, and Melodrama: The State of Film Narrative in 1907" in John Fell, ed. *Film Before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1983), 277-8.

36. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristen Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press 1985), 47.

37. Willis, op.cit. 9.

38. Soule, op.cit. 188.

39. Jeffrey Ruoff, "Conventions of Sound in Documentary" in Rick Altman, ed. *Sound Theory/Sound Practice* (New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall 1992), 222-226.

40. X. Theodore Barber, "The Roots of Travel Cinema: John L. Stoddard, E. Burton Holmes and the Nineteenth-Century Illustrated Travel Lecture," *Film History: An International Journal* 5.1 (1993), 69.

41. The absence of scholarship about live travelogues seems all the more curious given that series have existed for years at institutions of higher education, including, among others, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Iowa, the University of Illinois-Champaign, the University of Pennsylvania, and Stanford University.

by **Melinda Stone**

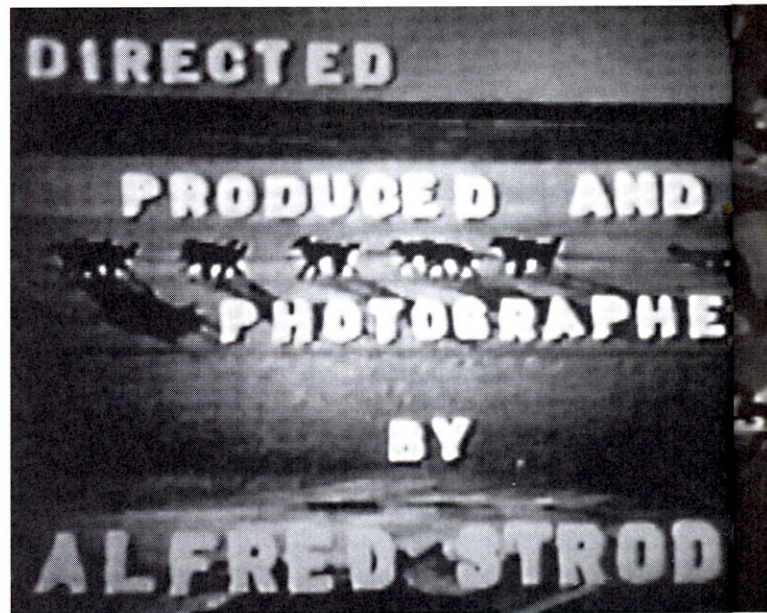
If It Moves – We'll Shoot It

The lights dimmed and the familiar sound of the projector filled the room, cueing all eyes to face the glowing silver screen. Within moments, brilliant Kodachrome images engaged the anxious audience, as the hum emanating from the projector was overcome by the following narration:

Crossing the Arctic Circle on an Alaskan Airlines Tour from Anchorage to Kotzebue and Nome made me a member of the Arctic Circle Club. You too can join this club and its fun.

The voice-over led the audience, made up of San Diego Amateur Movie Club members and invited guest, through Colonel Alfred E. Strode's 1971 amateur travelogue *The Arctic Circle Club*. The opening sequence was propelled by Strode's narration matched perfectly to images of him flipping through his Alaskan Airline's pamphlet, intercut with close-ups from the pages of an Alaskan tour book. Strode's informative tone guided the audience through his Alaskan journey to Kotzebue and Nome, while titles like *The Arctic Circle Club* and *Written and Directed by Colonel Strode* flashed across images of dog sleds and picturesque northern sunsets.²

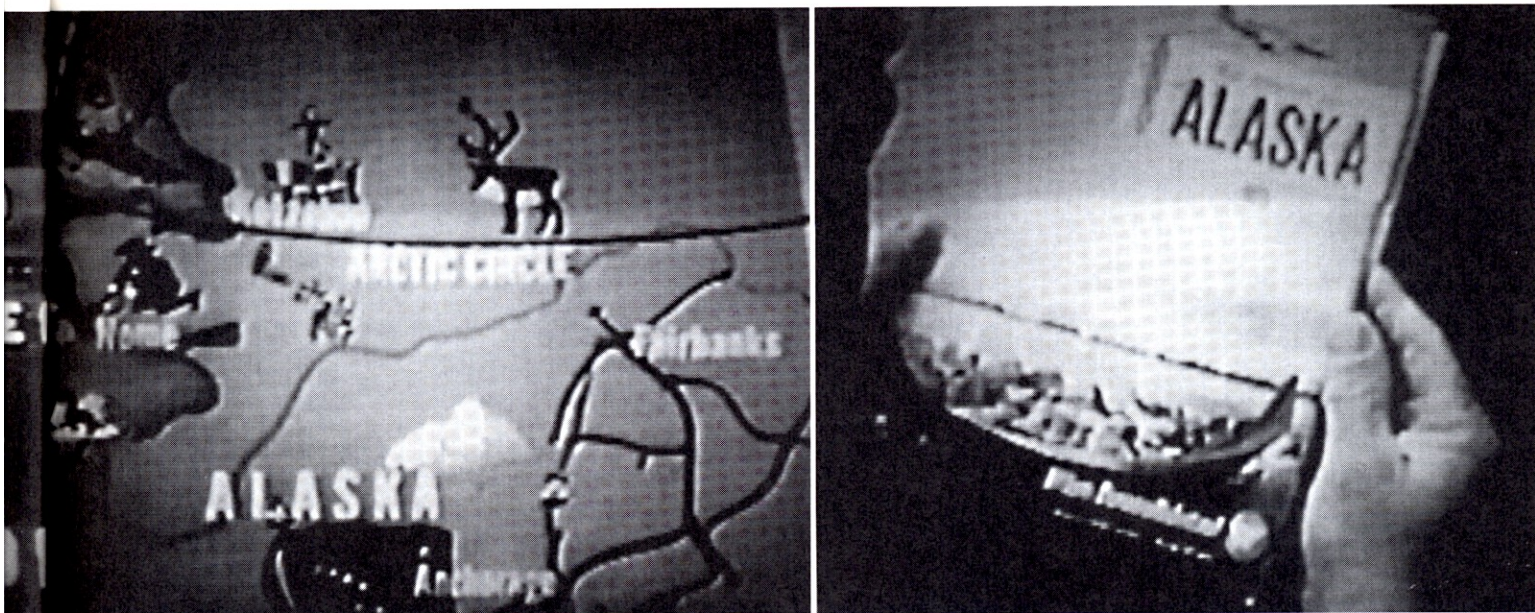
At the end, the audience clapped, the lights went up and Strode walked to the front of the group to answer questions and listen to comments about his technique. When this part of the presentation was finished, he returned to his seat, the projectionist turned off the lights once again, readying the audience for the next movie, another club member's original creation.



The above account of Strode's screening has been recreated based upon several interviews with San Diego Amateur Movie Club members, including Lois Strode-Aykroyd, and observations of current club activity. The event just described is representative of the many screenings that have taken place at the monthly meetings of the San Diego Amateur Film Club since 1949. The scene also reflects similar activities that occurred in hundreds of other movie clubs across the country during the boom years of amateur film making. According to statistics found by Patricia Zimmermann in the Bell and Howell Archive, between 1950 and 1958 the amateur photography market increased 112.5 percent. During the same period, eight millimeter camera use jumped by 41 percent. Zimmermann also notes that by 1956 the sale of professional equipment accounted for only three percent of Bell and Howell's total company sales, while amateur camera equipment represented 27 percent of the total. Statistics in *The Gadget Bag* indicate that, in 1960, approx-

"The subject matter we may deal with is endless in scope, and the techniques we may employ are only limited by our own inventiveness."

Athlone Perry, President, San Diego Amateur Movie Club, 1962¹



Title sequence, home-made map and opening shot from Strode's *Arctic Circle Club*

imately 50 million Americans were taking pictures and spending \$830 million on photographic supplies and equipment.³

In order to collect background information on Strode's travel films, I interviewed his widow, Lois Strode-Aykroyd, in March 1997 at a cafe in Rancho Bernardo, California.⁴ We discussed the process the two employed while touring the world and making films about their travels. She provided revealing anecdotes about their shooting, editing and projection experiences, giving insight to the material conditions in which their travelogues were produced and screened, and how these factors influenced the Strodes' productions.

Colonel Strode's working method included rigorous research for each site visited, meticulous pre-production details, informed framing of shots, and fastidious editing techniques. Strode specialized in travelogues which always

1. This quote taken from Athlone Perry's yearly kick-off letter to the San Diego Amateur Movie Club printed in *The Gadget Bag*, the club's monthly newsletter. The title of this article, *If It Moves—We'll Shoot It*, has been the motto of the San Diego Amateur Movie Club since its inception in 1949.

2. *The Arctic Circle Club* is just one of the 54 films that constitute the Strode Collection, films made by Alfred E. Strode, a retired Army Colonel, who captured his view of the world from 1947 - 1987 on 16 mm Kodachrome reversal color film. His films, donated by his wife, Lois Strode-Aykroyd, are housed in the University of California, San Diego's Factual Film Archive (FFA). I was introduced to Colonel Strode's films three years ago when I approached Steven O'Riordan, the film librarian, requesting to view any amateur films stored in FFA. Colonel Strode was an active member in the San Diego Movie Club from 1971 to his death.

3. For a more detailed analysis of camera sales and market shares during the camera industry boom please see chapter 5 in Patricia Zimmermann's *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1995).

4. This material was augmented by supporting written materials by Colonel Strode — scripts, shot lists, files on sites visited, donated by Lois Strode and contained in the Strode Collection.



included narration, a second sound track of ambient and non-diegetic sound sources, and inter-titles crediting all crew and cast members. The Strodes' vacations were dictated by their filmmaking. Before leaving home on any adventure, Strode would devise a story angle and shot list based upon travel literature, tour guides and other reference material he collected. Upon their return, Strode viewed his footage and wrote a script to accompany the images, often carrying out additional research to fill in the gaps. The narration and image worked in concert with a musical track chosen by Strode for its ability to create ambiance reminiscent of the location. Often natural sound, collected in the field by Lois Strode, was included in the final mix:

It was a very complicated thing to coordinate them all and when we would finally come up with a script, we would turn off all the phones in the house and go into a room and we would just sit there for two hours while he recorded the sound and it was a very traumatic time to get the music coordinated to his voice and commentary and if he dropped it anywhere along the line we would have to go back to the beginning. The longest 20 minutes of my life would be during these times. The microphone had to be held just right so it would pick up the sound of your voice and not the sound of the projector. We had to be so careful not to get the sound of that projector.⁵

While discussing the intended audience for their collection of short documentaries, Lois relayed to me that she and the Colonel screened their films at local San Diego travel clubs as well as at monthly meetings of the San Diego Movie Club throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s. Audiences, she modestly confessed, were sometimes in the range of 200 people:

They [the San Diego Movie Club] would always share new things that they had learned with one another. Sound problems that they had figured out, or show how to do a trick. It was a great help and they all enjoyed it very much and they enjoyed seeing each other's films. I always felt that Alfred stood right out there as far as creativeness is concerned; maybe he didn't have fancy tricks, but with his music and his commentary and his sensitivity, his films were wonderful to watch.⁶

Without the support of his wife and the localized network of other enthusiastic filmmakers provided by the San Diego Amateur Film Club, Colonel Strode might not have been able to produce his films with the same polished flare. He was reliant on his wife to provide assistance with shooting and editing, and as a member of the movie club, he gleaned information from other experienced film makers each month that he incorporated into his shooting technique. Lois recalls how the club played a role in the musical scores that enhanced each of her husband's films:

The music was always a time consuming task because he would want to get the right music. Everything would have to be timed perfectly. He sent away for phonographs with sounds, you know rain, or something fast, something sad, there were so many records like that, as you probably know. We had a big library of sound effects records. We learned about these records through the camera clubs.



Boy eating Mukluk from *Arctic Circle Club*

And we would exchange records at the camera club. We would have one and someone would have another. I think he and one of the other men in the club were buying them together.

Colonel Strode, like many other members, received abundant assistance from the San Diego Amateur Movie Club. Stan La Rue, the president of the amateur organization in 1963 described the function of the group in this way: "The activities of the club serve in three ways, to improve our motion pictures, to entertain and be entertained with films and to provide sociability with others who share a common interest in one of the finest of hobbies."⁷

Today, the San Diego Amateur Movie Club continues to meet once a month in an ivy-covered, one-story adobe hacienda in Balboa Park to screen, critique and learn from watching each other's films. A typical San Diego Amateur Film Club meeting consists of two or three movies ranging from travelogues to scenarios, a short talk on photographic techniques or a demonstration of a new camera gadget, and refreshments. Usually a raffle is held to give away gifts and flowers donated by the members. The filmmakers attract audiences by listing their monthly meetings in the local paper and posting notices outside the photographic arts building where the screenings are held. Visitors are never charged a fee and are encouraged to come to future meetings through mailings sent to those who sign a guest list. According to Phil Rapp, a long-term member of the club, writing in the October 1962 *The Gadget Bag*: "The

club always extends a warm welcome to our special guests and visitors to share in our hobby. After many hours of filming, splicing, editing, recording, and doing all the things that spell Motion Pictures; there is no better reward for all the time and effort spent than to have an appreciative audience to view our films."

Coming to a Theater Near You...

One of the most frustrating things about film history is not being able to see the material that is being discussed. I apologize for not being able to include more than just stills from the Kodochromatic journeys of Colonel Strode. Since meeting the current members of the SDAMC two years ago I have been introduced to a broad network of amateur clubs that span the globe. Thus far I have only been able to focus on the California portion of the amateur movie club scene for a traveling series that will take place this Fall. For more information about the California tour or how to contact amateur movie clubs in your area, please e-mail me: mstone@weber.ucsd.edu.

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5. As quoted from interview with Lois Strode-Aykroyd.

6. As quoted from interview with Lois Strode-Aykroyd.

7. Stan La Rue, March 1963 issue of *The Gadget Bag*.

Project 734

Digital Video and Non-Professional Filmmaking

by **Charles Tashiro**



Painters are not considered amateurish if their work does not look like LeRoy Neiman. Composers are not viewed as failures if their symphonies do not sound like Elton John. Indeed, even popular musicians are not all expected to sound as if they're auditioning for Top 40 radio. So why should "real" filmmaking always be defined on the basis of the Hollywood feature? How does an industry widely recognized for its general mediocrity continue nonetheless to set the standards for an entire art form?

Almost from its inception media production has been divided between a caste of professional technicians and artists on the one hand and everyone else on the other. This class of

media professionals has imposed a set of aesthetic values—glossy technique, trained actors, feature-length, narrative-based novelettish scripts—as a norm. As with any norm, these values become self-confirming, as work that fails to answer to them is patronized as at best "experimental," at worst "amateurish." Since only corporations with access to large financial resources can afford to produce at this level of execution, these values become the chief underpinning of film as an item of mass cultural production and consumption.

This logic of capital intensive media production is an international phenomenon, of which the American variant is merely the most obvious and successful. All national cinemas follow the same basic logic: film has to be expensive because it must answer to a set of professional criteria. Because film is expensive, it must have mass appeal. Because it must have mass appeal, anything that tries for more limited personal expression cannot be produced, or, when produced, can be "tolerated" as the arty, idiosyncratic expression of a "genius" filmmaker most notable for his or her deviations from the norm.

Cultural institutions such as museums that might be expected to offer and support alternatives to this model instead become accomplices to it. One way this is true is through the commissioning and exhibition of "video art" that even when successful suffers from the lack of a shared interpretive context. Arbitrary and self-serving as they are, the standards and codes proffered by the film industry are based on a shared social vocabulary of structured meaning. Once initiated into these codes, viewers do not have to be re-educated. The avant-garde, on the other hand, constantly re-invents the wheel, with the result that each work is not so much "individual" as atomistically isolated from its context.

At the other extreme, museums create retrospectives of commercial filmmakers, treating them with the same gravity (and humorlessness) as traditional works of art. Such policies have the perverse effect of focusing attention on the "art" of industrial production while ignoring its coercive, conformist reality. Combined with the commissioning of "video art," such practices make the experimentation of the

avant-garde seem like the only alternative to industrial production. Any kind of middle-ground that tries to advance formal experimentation *and* narrative is neglected in the effort to promote a homegrown industrial product and the experimental extreme.

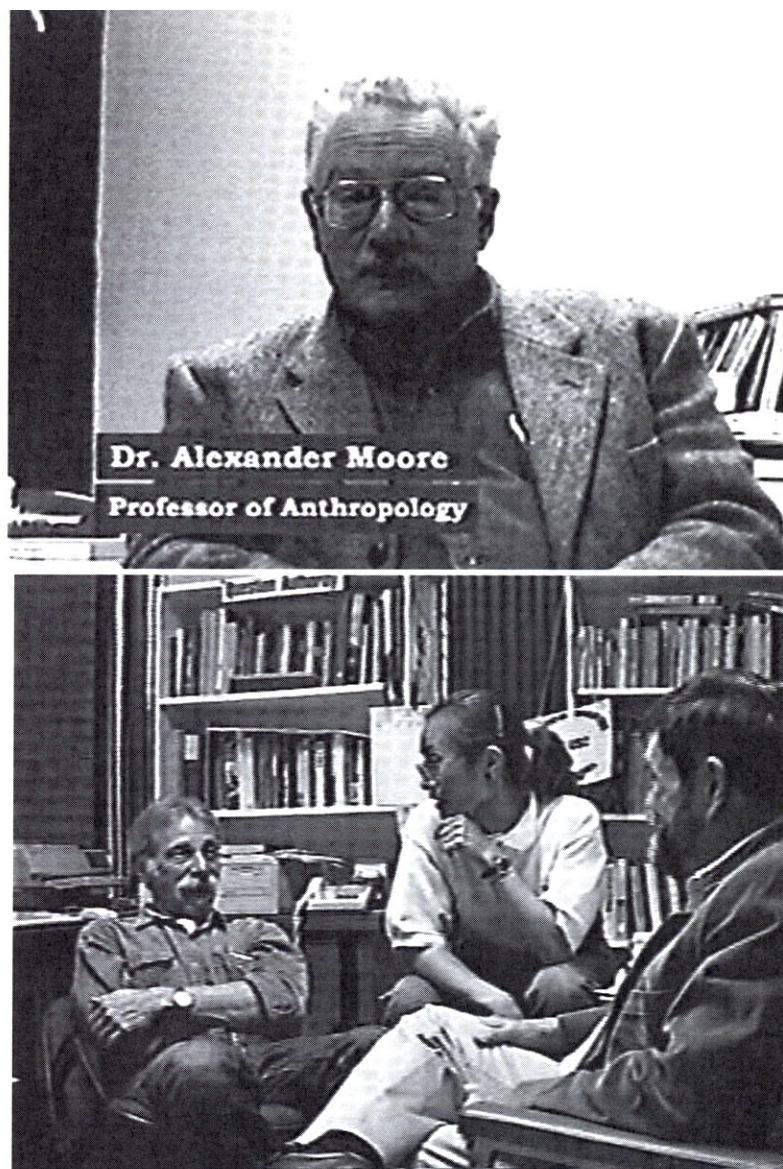
Universities are equally at fault. They establish film schools less with any hope of encouraging viable new models of production than of producing alumni who can be relied on to succeed in Hollywood and donate money to the schools. And while even the most conservative of film schools have traditions of experimentation and individual expression, inevitably these works are marginalized in the attention on the "real" movies made by successful feature filmmakers. These programs duplicate some of the more unfortunate aspects of the filmmaking world, turning out graduates who are encouraged to think of themselves as "professionals" before they think of themselves as filmmakers or artists. And unfortunately, that "professionalism" frequently translates into an exclusionary attitude towards those not similarly trained, or with interests in anything other than Hollywood success.

The industrial model thus seems formidable. We need only look at it from a different angle, however, to recognize that in the process of establishing its model of "professional" execution as the norm, mass media production has created several bad habits that will be very difficult to break. Chief among these is the huge expense these productions require. In an effort to control these costs, digital technologies have been introduced at all levels of professional production. Digital technologies, however, are at best a double-edge sword for mass media. While they can make it cheaper to produce traditional effects, they also introduce a new level of technical expectation that must be constantly surpassed in order for each production to seem glossier than the ones that preceded them. Moreover, digital technologies can do nothing to reduce the primary reason for Hollywood's exorbitant costs, the outrageous "above the line" fees demanded by actors, directors and writers.

Description and Context of the Project

Project 734 was an independent study research project and experiment conducted at the University of Southern California's Annenberg Center for Communication. The project was designed to supplement the USC film school's production program by providing an environment in which students were encouraged to develop projects that might otherwise be impossible in that program. Participants were told simply to shoot what they wanted and to explore the potentials of off-the-shelf technologies. No restrictions were made on content or form, aside from a limit on running time of twenty minutes.

Bar none, USC's School of Cinema-Television has had greater success in placing its graduates in the media industry than any other film school. While famous alumni like George Lucas, Robert Zemeckis, Randall Kleiser and John Singleton are often pointed to with pride, the School's greatest achievement has been the less spectacular placement of its grads at all levels of the film and television industries. This success has

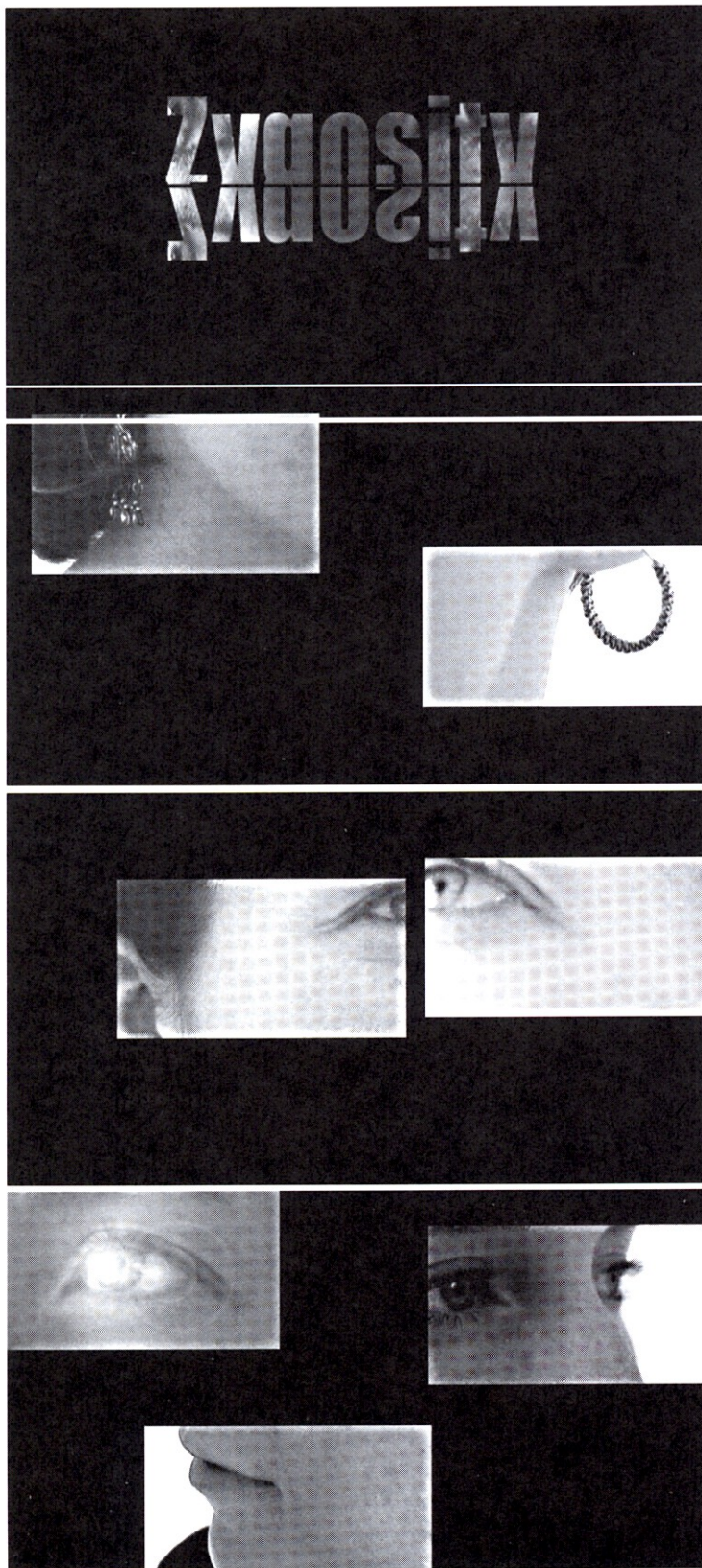


Three stills from Scott Frank's mock documentary *Academia: Life Off the Streets*

created the well known "USC mafia," the web of connections between friendly alumni always looking out for opportunities for themselves and fellow graduates. This team spirit derives from the conscious effort of the program to instill a sense of group identity in its students.

The success of this program cannot be underestimated, but its approach does have its downside. Encouraging group identity has the unfortunate consequence of suppressing individuality. Combined with the inevitable conformism the program's emphasis on placing students in "the industry" produces, it is not surprising that USC's film school has largely failed to produce filmmakers with distinctive styles. With the arguable exception of Lucas, none of the well-known USC alumni have achieved the unique approach of such film school graduates as Francis Coppola (UCLA) or Martin Scorsese (NYU). (Contrary to popular misconception, Steven Spielberg did not attend USC, although he has been an enthusiastic donor to the School.) Instead, the school has become a reliable source for TV movie directors.

Title and stills from Susan Vaill and Jennifer van Goethem's *Zygosity*



The students in Project 734 were given the chance to use fairly sophisticated video and digital editing tools. Participants had the use of two video-capture-capable Macintoshes, a Hi8 and a miniDV camcorder, a shotgun and a lavalier mike, a Lowell video lighting kit and a tripod. They edited their projects using Adobe Premiere 4.2. Unlike the traditional Production program, the project also included non-film students. The class was offered as an independent study through the Critical Studies department, with an additional requirement to write a brief analytical paper describing their experiences on the project. I required this because I believe in the value of encouraging all media producers to think analytically about their work.

Of the ten students in the project, five were Production students (three undergraduate, two graduate). Two were graduate students from the Critical Studies program. Two more were graduates from the Anthropology department. The last was an undergraduate from the university's Architecture program. All those from the film programs had at least some production experience before their involvement in the project, although the two Critical Studies majors had less than the production students. The students from Architecture and Anthropology had no production experience. I hoped that this mix would help to break down traditional disciplinary boundaries by allowing students from different backgrounds to work together.

I also sought to eliminate the artificial distinction between "professional" and "nonprofessional" production while simultaneously maintaining the formal rigor of the best of traditional filmmaking. Related to this goal, I had three major questions going into the project. First, what kind of work would talented individuals produce when freed of most financial, technical and conceptual constraints? Second, are there any biases introduced by the technologies themselves? Finally, what, if any, patterns would emerge from the experiment?

What was Produced

Of the nine projects (the two graduate Production majors collaborated on a single work), five (Eric Ruiz's *Surfdom*, Susan Vaill and Jennifer van Goethem's *Zygosity*, Monique Yamaguchi's *Documenting Sovereignty*, Nithila Peter's *Search for Hermes* and Lori Lovoy's *New Moon*) were documentaries. Ruiz's video looked at the surfers' culture in San Diego. Vaill and van Goethem explored the complex relationships between twins by videotaping Vaill and her sister Sarah in reminiscences about their youth. Yamaguchi sought to investigate the interrelationship between the Hawaiian sovereignty movement and independent filmmakers. Peter was interested in linking her experiences as a student with traditional (East) Indian mythology, while Lovoy documented the Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations in Los Angeles's Chinatown.

Documentary was also a factor in some of the non-documentary videos. Scott Frank's *Academia: Life Off the Street* mimicked the surfaces of traditional ethnographic films, for example, by following a group of USC students and treating them as if they were subjects from an exotic culture. Adrian Mendoza's *Project Lost Angeles* began as a documentary,

although it ended up as a more abstract, contemplative essay on life in the city. Ben Blanco's *Vision in a Dream*, inspired by Samuel Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" was openly experimental in form, but like most of the rest of the projects, relied largely on unstaged footage. Only Chad Kultgen's *Grey* worked in more or less traditional narrative form. Kultgen's project about a serial killer was nonetheless among the most experimental technically.

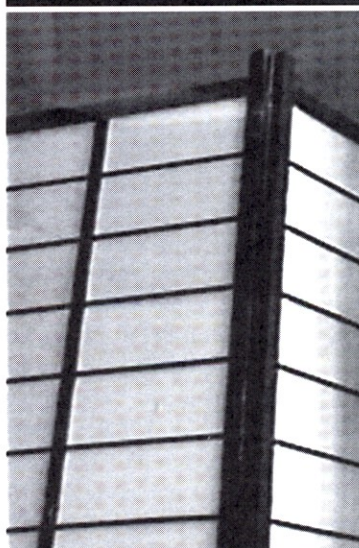
At first, the popularity of documentary was a little surprising. Given the large number of production students and that program's emphasis on narrative filmmaking, I expected more story-based experimentation. Of course, "documentary" is a broad label. In fact, of the five documentary projects, only Ruiz's, Lovoy's and Yamaguchi's used fairly traditional documentary technique. Frank's parody of the form made his video *look* like such documentaries, but in fact it was tightly scripted and directed, thus making it fundamentally closer to Kultgen's narrative. *Zygosity* and *Search for Hermes* on the other hand, were highly experimental in form. Indeed, in some ways, both had more in common with Blanco's openly experimental work than with Ruiz, Yamaguchi and Lovoy's more traditional documentaries.

There are, of course, production advantages to documentary filmmaking that may partially account for its over-representation in this group of projects. Depending on the ambition of the producer, the form does not require elaborate pre-production or planning, only a receptiveness to the subject. It also tends to be less expensive (never a minor factor for students) assuming that the producer does not over-shoot drastically and has a fairly focused theme in mind at the outset. Documentaries also address another familiar concern for students, the end of the semester deadline, because they can be quick to shoot.

There were more than a few hints that such negative motivations were at work. One student, for example, initially proposed to make several short commercial-like projects, but opted in the end for the relative simplicity of documentary shooting. Two others did not begin production on their videos until the last month of the semester, thus making it impossible for them to put together complex productions. The editing of another project that *did* involve some complex shooting nonetheless was postponed until responsibilities for other courses had been completed. The results were a video considerably shorter than what it might have been otherwise, given the amount of footage that had been shot.

On a more positive note, the Vaill/van Goethem collaboration did allow both to express their themes in non-literary terms. Exploiting the digital editing tools' potential for transformation and superimposition, the videomakers were able to "...comment on and deconstruct ... societal presumptions [about twins] in a visual and aural pastiche using images and recordings of Susan and Sarah Vaill." It also motivated the two videomakers to explore another program, Adobe AfterEffects, to complete their title sequence. The results were exactly the kind of technically sophisticated yet personally motivated production that Hollywood cannot affordably produce, assuming it had any interest in doing so.

Stills from Nithila Peter's *Search for Hermes*



Yamaguchi's documentary, by allowing her to work in a relatively economical and compact format, made it possible for her "...to work on a project that has been an extension of my earlier theoretical works on native Hawaiian culture, literature and filmmaking." The medium's lack of expense, portability and near broadcast quality imagery made it possible to explore a politically loaded subject in a manner that could stand up to the technical expectations created by far more expensive tools. Despite this formal achievement, however, she remained free to exploit the form to suit her own expressive needs.

Frank's *Academia* video provided perhaps the most interesting results, not simply in terms of the video itself, but in light of the potentials the process opened up for him. A filmmaking novice, Frank was able not only to bridge the realms of documentary and fiction, but also to discover a whole new aspect to the use of film in his own teaching. (He is a PhD student in the Anthropology department.) After noting that he "...had no intention at the time I began of pursuing further filmic efforts," and admitting further to a "fear of the editing process" that delayed his post-production, Frank also noted that "I learned more about film from making this than I had in my previous few film courses combined." He was pleased enough with the results to plan to show it at a national Anthropology conference in 1999.

The Biases of the Technology

The best idea must be expressed through the limitations of the available tools. In digital video production, there are two major technological sets that influence results, production equipment (camcorders, lights, mikes) and post-production hardware and software. Each set obviously has built-in capabilities and constraints. Not least of the latter are those features that are *supposed* to work, but which often fail. It was not unusual, for example, for students to experience difficulties printing their videos to tape. One discovered after several test prints that his project was slipping synch. (The synch slippage results from a programming limitation in Premiere which has purportedly been corrected in version 5.0.) It was routine for the machines to crash during edit sessions, or simply not to do what had been specified in the edits. That the students were able to maintain their enthusiasm under such circumstances was a testament to their commitment to the project.

The production equipment is more reliable and familiar. It is arguable that the light camcorders the students used for their projects contain a bias towards quick and easy shooting, and thus towards documentary technique. Oddly, despite the prevalence of documentaries in the project, that theory would not be borne out by the results. With the exception of Lovoy's *New Moon*, which was shot in response to immediate, ongoing events, all of the straight documentaries were in fact staged and lit with some degree of care. They furthermore largely lacked the freely roaming, hand-held camerawork of *cinema verité* style shooting. In fact, the only video to take advantage of the relative invisibility and flexibility of the handheld camcorder other than *New Moon* was Chad Kultgen's *Grey*. Shooting staged footage on a popular pedestrian mall on a busy weekend night, Kultgen was able to get

around the usual interference such shooting would encounter by remaining inconspicuous.

A more universally exploited advantage offered by the camcorders was the ability to shoot in low-light situations. Kultgen's video, for example, included scenes shot by candle-light, while his outdoor shots were lit entirely by street lamps. Vaill and van Goethem shot most of their footage in existing light, with only occasional use of a soft fill. Ruiz was able to shoot an on-camera interview at 5:30AM with no more lights than an overhead street lamp and a small light from a telephone box. With the exception of *Documenting Sovereignty*, which used some lights for interviews, and *Visions in a Dream*, which included framing shots lit by movie lights, none of the rest of the students used any video lights.

There were two consequences to this low-light shooting. One, obviously, was a greater roughness in the image. Particularly for those videos shot outdoors at night, there was significant image degradation compared to the often otherwise quite beautiful footage. The less obvious consequence was photography that under the best circumstances achieved much more sophisticated and under-stated lighting than is usually the case with student filmmaking. While the video image is still considered the step-child to film, the subtle effects made possible by these camcorders' light sensitivity may well reverse the edge, at least for low-budget productions. Especially given the extra control over the image that digital editing tools provide, not to mention their financial advantages, the end of 16mm cinematography as a production medium may well be in sight.

As for the sound tools, most of the students did not use them. Only Ruiz, Kultgen, Peter, Frank and Yamaguchi had any sequences requiring lip synchronization, and only Yamaguchi relied on it extensively. (She was also the only one to use the shotgun mike.) Otherwise, the students relied on the in-camera microphones or post-synched recorded voice-overs. This secondary role of the soundtrack probably results from the legacy of the training given the production students, who are prevented from using synchronous sound in their early projects. For the non-production students, the neglect of audio probably resulted from not wanting to take on too much technology too soon. It may also result from the some of the editing tools' clumsiness in handling sound.

As I write, the version of Premiere that we used in Project 734 has been superseded by an update, so many of my comments I make may be out of date by the time you read them. That, of course, is part and parcel of digitally based work, the constant change and refreshed potential made possible by successive revisions of the software and hardware. That is its greatest appeal and biggest drawback. And while the power such programs offer to the user is immense, particularly when compared with traditional low-budget film and videomaking, we should not overlook that with new potential come new constraints.

First, there are the hardware issues, such as the power of the computer's central processing unit, the video card used for recording, the amount of the computer's random access memory (RAM) and the speed and storage capacity of the hard

drive on which the captured video will be stored. Even the most informed consumer is unlikely to be able to anticipate the range of problems and options that will arise from individual productions. Just anticipating the amount of hard drive storage capacity, for example, can impact a project. Even the largest hard drives get used up quickly by the monster files created by video editing, and a project that has not been planned adequately for such needs will quickly be compromised. These compromises arguably prejudice users either toward smaller projects or toward more hardware. (It was largely to avoid these problems that I imposed the twenty minute time limit on the students in Project 734.)

The software introduces its own compromises and constraints, even as it provides new potentials. It also has its own biases. Certainly something like cultural precedent and prejudice is provided by the sample video given to purchasers of Premiere, produced by artist John Sanborn. An impressionistic collage entitled *Sixth Sense* "pulls out all the stops," to quote Sanborn's own description, in order to demonstrate the program's potential. The potential is real enough: the video provides a non-stop barrage of multiple superimpositions, traveling mattes, moving type, stereo sound, split-second cuts and other effects that are all fully achievable in the program. Such an example provides a description of the type of work the company believes can be performed with its software if not a prescription for its use.

Clearly Adobe has no interest in imposing Sanborn's model on users. The programmers have in fact gone out of their way to appeal to both film and video practitioners through a hybrid interface that borrows metaphors from both fields. From video, the program borrows basic functionality, including time code and a thirty frames/sixty fields per second time base. (This can be changed by the user.) The program's interface, on the other hand, evokes film editing, presumably under the assumption that film's physical tangibility works more effectively to familiarize the novice user. The advantages of this mixed metaphor are fairly obvious. By including aspects of both film and video editing, the program offers avenues into the program to people from both backgrounds.

The program is designed to allow users the ability to build and preview complex visual effects in a short amount of time. The results are instantly changeable, even though the "immediacy" of the desktop video editor is probably considerably less immediate than similar effects composed in a video edit bay. The obvious difference is that few people can afford to equip their homes or offices with such facilities, and only a few more can rent them as needed.

That the user will want to produce such results is almost guaranteed by the program's ability to create flashy visuals through such devices as "filters" that allow significant manipulation of image quality. Sanborn's sample video suggests that the programmers' assumed its users would be most interested in such special effects. This assumption then receives an indirect technological reinforcement. Since the storage limitations of the hardware may have forced the user to sacrifice visual fidelity in order to produce smaller files, the splashy visual effects can help cover the deficiencies of resolution and



Stills from Lori Lovey's *New Moon*

color rendition. (Something like enhancing mediocre meat with a flavorful sauce.)

Where Premiere clearly does *not* provide the user much power is control of the soundtrack. (The new version of the program reportedly provides greater sound-editing capabilities.) To a certain extent, this limitation may derive from the programmers too literally following professional film and video precedent. In both cases, image and sound are usually cut by different people. In desktop video production, however, it is much more likely that the picture and sound will be cut by the same person. Unless the editor has access to another program (such as Macromedia's SoundEdit 16), he or she is limited to manipulating the volume levels and in and out points of the soundtrack. As a result, sound once again gets relegated to a secondary position. This prejudice is particularly odd, given that some of the likeliest users of the *image* potential offered by the program would be music video directors.

These assumptions and prejudices begin to add up. Even though they are fairly easy to ignore because they are relative-

ly explicit, the user cannot always work against them. The quieter advantages offered by digital media sneak up to produce more permanent and lasting effects on expression. Thus, if the tendency towards documentary production in Project 734 was surprising, the almost equal emphasis on stylistic experimentation and asynchronous sound was not.

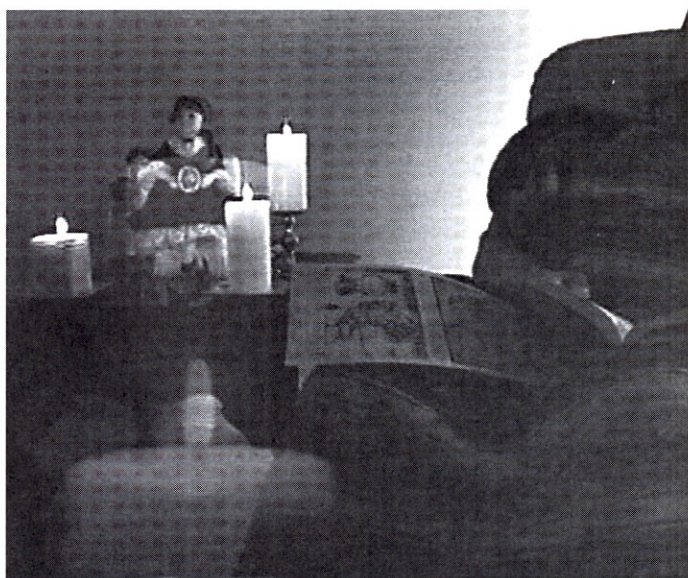
At a bare minimum, all of the projects took advantage of the control over density and color temperature that Premiere offers. By manipulating brightness and contrast and color balance, the students were able to enhance the Realistic possibilities of the video image. Such features are available to professional filmmakers, of course, and are squarely within the normal practices of narrative filmmaking. The difference lies in the ease the program gives to such adjustments and the fact that the changes are directly under the author's control, rather than filtered through a laboratory technician. It was probably for this reason that the projects displayed a uniformly high level of imagery. Such authorial involvement marks a significant change over standard filmmaking and film education, which more or less distances the director from such technical concerns.

Kultgen, Peter, Blanco, Mendoza, Vaill and van Goethem moved beyond this Realist manipulation of the image into active play with color, texture, and time-based effects. All relied heavily on superimpositions, composited imagery and other technically advanced effects. In Kultgen and Mendoza's cases, these visual experiments were largely motivated by their stories. In Blanco and Vaill and van Goethem's cases, such experimentation formed the *basis* of the work. They would be inconceivable without the visual expression made possible by digital tools.

Patterns?

While it is presumptuous to base too much on a single experiment consisting of only ten students, the combination of documentary prejudice and technical experimentation revealed by Project 734 does suggest several *possible* long term developments from these tools. The first and most obvious is an increased technical splashiness for "amateur" productions, making them look increasingly like professional ones (and possibly more and more like each other). This development is double-edged. While it is true that desktop video brings previously unheard of levels of technical capability to the amateur, the long-term effect of that finesse will almost certainly be to increase technical expectation. Hollywood has always done well by keeping its otherwise mediocre material brighter and shinier than what people could do on their own. That effort to stay ahead of the homemade is not likely to change.

This need to keep ahead of what people can do on their desktops is likely to make professional media ever more saturated and technically dense. Media professionals will *have* to inflate the technique of their productions in order to compete with people's individual output in the same way they had to introduce 3D, stereo and widescreen to compete with television. When *anyone* can do a traveling matte or blue-screen, *no one* will be impressed with the effect. In the short term, this ever-greater heightening of technical expectation will proba-



Ben Blanco's *Vision in a Dream*

bly work to Hollywood's advantage, as studios are able to buy the most expensive equipment, produce the most elaborate effects and hire the greatest talent.

It is not too far-fetched to imagine a moment, however, when the dream factory has been reduced to a shiny showcase for the latest digital effects that people then take home (or download) to do with as they please. Nor should we overlook the fact that even as Hollywood will be able to invest more money in flashier effects, the *technical* differences between a multimillion dollar production and a desktop video are likely to shrink to the point of being undetectable. Something like this is already happening in popular music, as musicians armed with samplers and synthesizers produce audio CDs without the help of a studio. The movie companies will then be faced with having to spend more and more to achieve less and less of a difference. At some point, economics will catch up.

It is for this reason that the entertainment industry has at best an ambivalent interest in the advancement of digital tools. While their applications to existing tasks have no doubt simplified and reduced the expense of some aspects of production, they also have the long-term potential to erode one of the major advantages the studios enjoy over individual production. Combined with delivery over the Internet, or something equivalent to it, the studios also lose their monopoly on distribution.

In fact, *amateurs* have the long-term economic advantage because they do not have to pay the outrageous above-the-line expenses that no introduction of digital technology can reduce, which ties into the popularity of documentary technique. Documentary, whether traditional or experimental, has a much more direct relationship to its makers' concerns than narrative features, which must be filtered through the demands for popular acceptance. Even the most expensive and elaborate documentary productions tend to deal with

weightier and more controversial subject matter than most Hollywood features. Whether addressing a social concern or a personal dilemma, documentaries are much more direct in their expression and impact.

There is already a tradition of "personal" documentaries, mostly shot on video, which have established a precedent for using the medium for direct expression. To the extent these videos still rely on professional post-production houses, however, they involve considerable expense. When the expense disappears and potential authors are left with nothing but the desire to "write" with the tools, film and video become much more immediate modes of expression. The "home movie" is the predecessor of this tendency, though tainted with expectations of formal imprecision and thematic tedium. But we would do well to re-think our condescension toward home movies. If nothing else, they can be immensely moving for the people who made them.

Digital tools help to overcome some of the failings of "home movies." While they cannot make up for a lack of talent or ideas, they can give those with ambition and formal sophistication the means to express powerful, personally motivated concepts in compelling form. The results are almost guaranteed to provide a much more resonant experience, albeit for a smaller audience, than anything Hollywood could produce.

There is another implication in the results from Project 734. Traditional categorical boundaries like "narrative" or "experimental" or "documentary" themselves begin to break down with the flexibility offered by digital editing. Frank's *faux* documentary was merely the most blatant example of this blurring. Kultgen's narrative *Grey* was by far the most ambitious formally of all the projects. Vaill and van Goethem's "documentary" was so only in the sense of working from unstaged footage. Mendoza intercut staged and caught footage seamlessly. Yamaguchi explored the social concern of Hawaiian sovereignty, but did so from the perspective of her own work as a critic and videomaker.

Digital media's transformative potentials are at the root of this categorical blurring. Producers can use them as replacements for traditional tools, and they function reasonably well in that capacity. At the same time, the ease of photography and manipulation make it more and more likely that an original shot will be viewed less for its integral content and more for its potential to be changed into something else. If a traditional documentarian, for example, is content to show a person working, finding in that existential fact the purpose of the shot, a digital artist is much more likely to view the shot *formally*, as just so much visual material to be kept or altered or both, not as a semi-sacred record of a particular moment in time. The original shot is no less truthful to its source. It has simply changed purpose, from recording a moment to providing visual material.

This potential suggests "formalism," the indulgence in technique for its own sake. Whether such a development is positive or negative is a matter of opinion. It is worth recognizing, though, that viewed objectively, there are few things more "formalist" than Hollywood's doctrinaire investment in

the three-act drama, positive identification with characters and pseudo-Realist uses of space, since this doctrine requires a *pro forma* acceptance of a set of values apart from expressive concern. Every idea must be expressed through a "story" regardless of whether or not such expression is appropriate. Ideally this "story" should be developed at feature length, not so much because all stories are best served by two hours of cinematic expression, but because the studios have to provide predictable product to their exhibitors.

In short, a formula, if not a form, is central and essential to Hollywood. For a mainstream filmmaker to criticize digital cinema for its "formalist" experimentation is the height of hypocrisy, and maybe of fear. Suppose for a moment that the visual experimentation encouraged by programs such as Premiere begins to shake the public's interest in narrative-centered features. And suppose too that people get used to short films. (Music videos are popular, after all.) The cheaply produced, visually interesting, personally expressive and rewarding *short film* is one thing Hollywood *cannot* produce more effectively than individuals working in their dens and garages. The long term consequence of digital video, in short, may be the ever greater decadence of industrial filmmaking, an ever decreasing ability to deal with serious issues and concerns that can arouse an audience to anything more than physical sensation. When people have their own works to express their interests, they may no longer seek to find them mirrored in commercial, alienated work. And if audiences with interests beyond loud jolts stay away from public exhibition, industrial filmmakers will have only those interested in the basest of communication for viewers.

If there is a fly in this ointment, it is the studios' monopoly on distribution. The biggest problem I face with the Project 734 videos is how to get them shown publicly. No matter how personal the projects may be, none of the people who made them have an interest in hiding the results in a closet, nor should they. We may have to wait for the Internet to provide sufficient band-width to be able to deliver product effectively, over a wide area. In the meantime, we will have to exhibit locally and publicly.

In a way, though, to lament that limitation may be missing the point. For with the development of new modes of production and expression will almost certainly come new modes of distribution and exhibition. And it may well be that "exhibition" may cease meaning anything much more than showing it to friends and family. For that matter, "production" and "consumption" may also cease having much distinction as people shoot their own works to satisfy their own emotional needs, then show the results to those who are interested. Is it a good or a bad thing when creative energy becomes purely local? I don't know; I only know what it won't be: Hollywood.

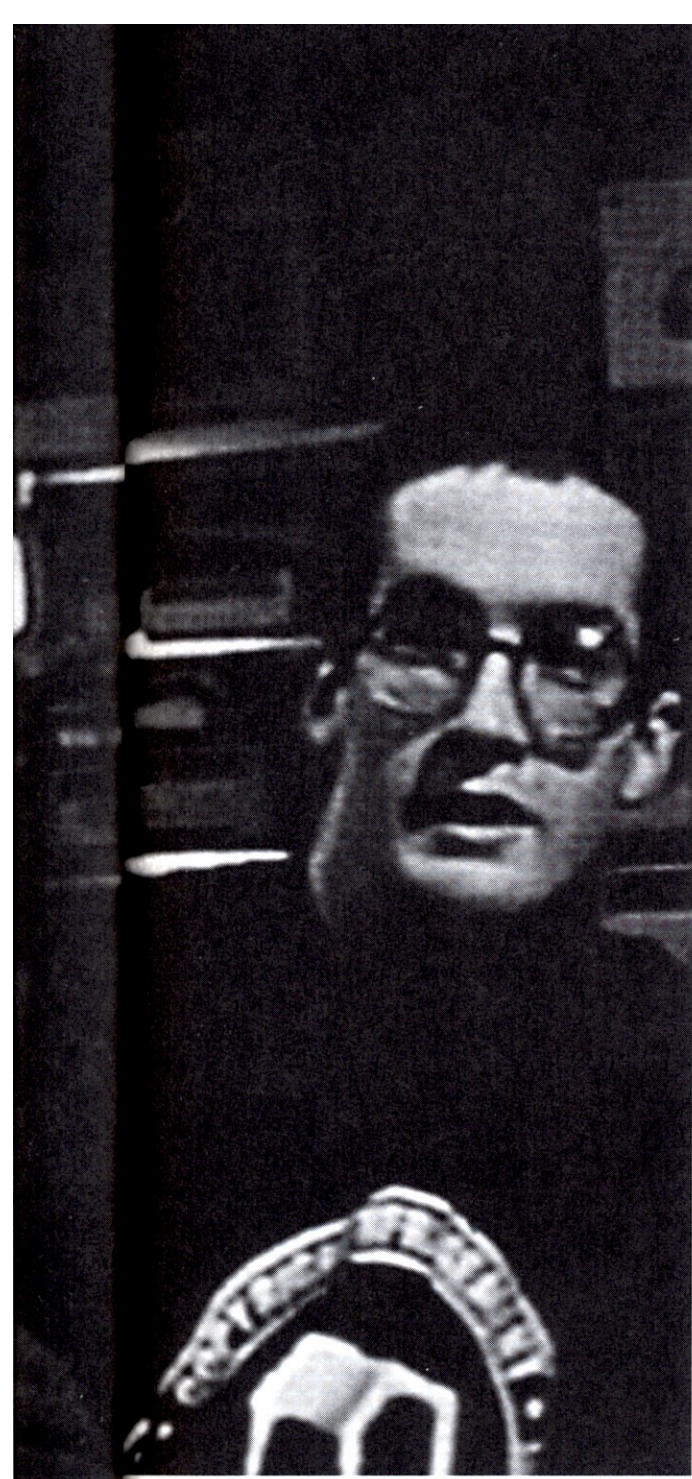
Charles Tashiro is the Director of the New Literacy Project, an interdisciplinary collaboration between USC's School of Cinema-Television, College of Letters and Science and the Annenberg Center for Communication. His book, Pretty Pictures: Production Design and the History of Film, is available from the University of Texas Press.



Flowers in the Dustbin

Termite Culture and Detritus Cinema

by **Scott MacKenzie**



John Paizs's *Springtime in Greenland*

I think it's healthy to work with all the materials cluttering up our brains: The *Flintstones*' tune; the Shell sign, "snap, crackle, pop."

Craig Baldwin¹

Any film, any cheap film, if you put it underground for fifty years, becomes interesting. You just take a shot of people walking, and that's enough: the weight of history is so incredible.

Yoko Ono²

In *fin du millennium* western culture, at a time where much is made of the proliferation of images, it may seem somewhat paradoxical that the recasting, recycling and reappropriating of images runs rampant. At a time where many claim images are taking on lives of their own, old images, thought dead and buried, are being retrieved, revived and revitalised. After a century of production, the cinematic image has become a part of the landscape, yet within this so-called post-modern imagescape, there is an increased tendency for images of the past, images which existed on the margins of culture at their moment of production, to reappear, reappropriated into new forms and contexts. These appropriated images, more often than not, come from neglected cinematic styles and forms, yet it is these neglected images that most often contain previously undetected or unearthed traces of the past. Dave Marsh, discussing the commodity-fragments that exist at the margins of culture, describes these cultural artefacts as "termite trash": "[. . .] an insidious burrowing thing that always contained more than was possible given its surface dimensions."³ One can see this in industrial, propaganda, animated, exploitation, pornographic and educational films, all of which provide an aesthetic of consumer capitalism that is, in many ways, the underbelly of twentieth century cinematic production. And these discarded images of the past can be put to many uses: a case in point is the recent deployment of the hyper-sterile aesthetic developed by industrial, propaganda and educational films of the 1940s and 1950s in films such as John Paizs's *Springtime in Greenland* (1983), Todd Haynes' *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1988) and Lewis Klahr's *Altair* (1991). Here, pastiche, parody and appropriation merge, denaturalising the 1950s industrial aesthetic and laying bare the convergence of ideology and history that lies at the core of the sponsored film.

1. Scott MacDonald, "Craig Baldwin" in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 176.

2. Scott MacDonald, "Yoko Ono" in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 146.

3. Dave Marsh, *Louie Louie: The History and Mythology of the World's Most Famous Rock 'n' Roll Song; Including Full Details of its Torture and Persecution at the Hands of the Kingsmen, J. Edgar Hoover's F.B.I., and a Cast of Millions; and Introducing, for the First Time Anywhere, the Actual Dirty Lyrics* (New York: Hyperion, 1993), 5.

The selling of not only product but lifestyle, central to the aesthetics and politics of the sponsored film, is foregrounded in the aforementioned filmmakers' work, demonstrating that the style deployed in sponsored films had further-reaching effects than one typically assumes when dismissing them simply as kitsch. In many ways, the recurring presence of these images supports a point-of-view put forth by Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle*: "In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present *model* of socially dominant life."⁴

The function of much of contemporary experimental and avant-garde cinema is to strip bare this process of commodification. Paizs's *Springtime in Greenland*, for instance, echoes the industrial films of the 1940s and 1950s. Paizs's work, however, is not really that much of an exaggeration of the discourse found in the films of the time, such as Crawley Film's *A Letter From Rosemere* (C.I.L./Agricultural Chemicals Division, C.I.L., 1946) and the NFB's *The Plots Thicken* (1944), both of which extol the values of DDT; instead, *Springtime in Greenland* is an uncanny recasting of the aesthetics of these films of the past into the present. The film tells the story of Nick, a suburban boy who is obviously alienated from the stultifying environment in which he lives. His life has been interpolated by the dead, late twentieth century culture rotting around him and this alienation from consumer culture as embodied by suburbia is foregrounded by the use of the style of the industrial film. *Springtime in Greenland* opens with a montage of the town of Greenland, its banality played up through the adoption of the editing style and the friendly yet detached voice-over of the compilation films of the 1940s and 1950s. Yet while the cinematic form is that of the Cold War years, the culture portrayed is that of the 1970s, of ugly Hawaiian shirts, Corvettes and Speedos. The effect of this juxtaposition is quite jarring. For instance, part two of the film focuses on the importance of water, in the style of the compilation film, foregrounding its waste in suburban culture, while part three begins with an inter-title which reads: "The House of Tomorrow, the latest in the 'Living in the Future, Now' Film Series," with a voice-over that reiterates the theme of this section: "rain is the lifeblood of the house of tomorrow." Again, the film foregrounds the intensified patterns of editing found in the 1950s compilation film, ending with sprinklers soaking the lawn and all the water running down the sewer drain. The film's humour is derived from the juxtaposition of the banality of suburban culture with the hyperbolic style of 1950s documentary film. The juxtaposition achieves two things: the first is to demonstrate suburbia's vacuity; the second is to excavate not only the style of 1950s industrial and educational cinema, but also to demonstrate how the promises made in the those films as to the beauty and abundance of suburban culture and capitalism were falsified through manic montage. The effect is to leave both suburbia and the ideology of the 1950s compilation film stripped bare.

Other examples of reappropriation include the use of footage from industrial, educational and exploitation films in found footage films such as Klahr's *Her Fragrant Emulsion* (1987) and *Downs are Feminine* (1993) and Craig Baldwin's *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America* (1991) and *Sonic Outlaws* (1995), among many others.⁵ In these instances, the merging of Sergei Eisenstein's theory of dialectical montage and Walter Benjamin's conceptualisation of the dialectical image allow the fossilised meanings embedded within these discarded images to be foregrounded. In the case of both examples, styles of filmmaking which would not have been considered particularly "aesthetic" at their moment of production become, through reappropriation, viable and at times poignant critiques of twentieth century consumer capitalism. As Dave Marsh notes, the power of trash has increased steadily over the twentieth century:

We live in a world of disposable icons, of Ten-Day Wonders and This Year's Models. [...] Andy Warhol may not have accurately measured the half-life of fame. It surely persists longer than fifteen minutes, which accounts for the proportionate rise in boredom as a determining factor in everyday life. But Warhol got it exactly right about the general ambition of life in a mediocracy. Trash is no longer a dispensable appliance of contemporary existence.⁶

The recasting of old, discarded images and styles is not solely the providence of the avant-garde, however. One finds the use of found footage in mainstream films such as *Stiff Upper Lips* (UK, 1998) where it is used to comedic effect as back-projection; the retro-1980s style of *The Wedding Singer* (US, 1998) is, in some ways similar to Paizs's film; and with films such as *Pulp Fiction* (US, 1994) and *Jackie Brown* (US, 1997) Quentin Tarantino has made a career out of pastiche and appropriation. Indeed, the intensified speed at which culture is recycled can be seen in a recent review of the re-release of *Grease* (US, 1978): "The recycling of culture grows ever more frantic—since when did twentieth anniversaries have to be marked by a re-release?" The reviewer then describes a sequence of the film in a manner that would better suit the analysis of a found footage film, stating: [...] the fantasy sequences boast the surreal, camp confidence of Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* with a bit of 1968's 'Elvis TV Special' thrown in."⁷ However, questions about appropriation and the recasting of the past are solely ironic in these films, and do not strip away the 'naturalness' of their signification.

Therefore, at the forefront of this shuffling through the dustbin of cinematic history is, perhaps surprisingly, avant-garde cinema. At first, it would be easy to see avant-garde film's new-found concern with politics and history as antithetical to the dominant concerns of American avant-garde film practice. Indeed, Paul Arthur sums up the avant-garde's typical concerns in the following manner: "For nearly thirty years it was an unspoken desire of the American avant-garde to exist outside of history in an aes-

thetic preserve sealed by social and economic marginality, formal alterity to dominant cinema, and adherence to the self-validating criteria of Romantic consciousness."⁸ More caustically, filmmaker Keith Sanborn—who also subtitles the classic situationist films, such as Guy Debord's *La société du spectacle* (1968) and René Viénet's *La dialectique peut-elle casser des briques?* (1972)—while addressing the canonical version of the 'Ten Commandments' of American avant-garde film history, notes that "Sitney's *Visionary Film* constitutes a kind of dictionary of received ideas for the avant-gardiste. It is high modernist in design, nationalist if not provincialist in its outlook, sexist in its particular omissions, and ethnocentric in the formalist circumspection of its discourse. We are presented with the search for form as the telos of cinema."⁹ And as Sanborn notes elsewhere, there are strong reasons for moving away from the formalism of the old avant-garde: "for my generation, [...] formal experimentation was at a dead end, that in fact there were too many films already, and that what was needed wasn't new films or formal innovation in that sense, but rather a better understanding of what was already out there."¹⁰ The fact that there were already far too many images of which to make cogent sense does not only apply to the avant-garde, but to twentieth century visual culture in general: "Also, I think it has to do with being part of the TV generation, and as a group we were much more visually literate in a certain kind of way than the previous generation, not necessarily in terms of quality, but certainly in terms of quantity. And that sort of sheer mass of data required a different sense of the politics of seeing, and for the people I know, I think the politics of seeing is a more key issue than the art of vision."¹¹

In much the same way the American avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s was looked upon as a radical break with mainstream cinematic concerns, the new avant-garde sees the old formal concerns of American avant-garde cinema as in many ways bankrupt. Unlike "classical" experimental film, the recent wave of avant-garde cinema, of which Sanborn is a part, is expressly political and historical in both its style and content. Yet, this seemingly new concern not only with history, but the processes of history-making, develops not as an epistemological shift within avant-garde cinematic practice, but as an attempt to retrieve, analyse and deconstruct cinematic styles that have shaped the collective memory of consumer, capitalist society—the very society that is the historical antithesis to the American avant-garde. The continuity between the past and present of the American avant-garde is precisely this antithetical stance toward mainstream consumer culture. The break with avant-garde cinema's past is that traditional American avant-garde film was, in essence, a parallel cinema which did not intersect with the mainstream to any great degree—Mike Kuchar's films such as *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1964), George Kuchar's *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966) and the works of Kenneth Anger, such as *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1964) and *Scorpio Rising* (1964) are the exceptions that prove the rule—while the new under-

ground is confrontational in its relationship to the dominant cinema.

For the new wave of avant-garde and underground filmmakers who work with image appropriation, the cinematic style of the 1950s industrial and educational films are, in many instances, read as the key to the formation of the North American cultural psyche; the valorisation of the role played by the cinema in this process should not be understated. While Arthur notes, "as the cinema nears the end of its 'filmic phase', the avant-garde has adopted as its dominant project an inquest on History," this history is one that takes the cinema to be the prism through which 'History' is to be seen, deciphered and recast.¹²

Thus, it seems that both frenetic image-making and the strange return of avant-garde film at the end of the century point not to the twin deaths of the referent and the cinema, but to a new kind of referentiality. This new cinematic referentiality is self-reflexive, but dissimilar in nature to the Brechtian turns taken by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet in *Not Reconciled* (West Germany, 1965), Theo Angelopoulos in *Broadcast* (Greece, 1968), Jean-Pierre Lefebvre in *Jusqu'au coeur* (Québec, 1968) and Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen in *Riddles of the Sphinx* (UK, 1977). Brechtian cinema, and especially Jean-Luc Godard's work between *Made in USA* (France, 1966) and *British Sounds* (France, 1969), had as its political goal to defamiliarize the spectator with the realist capacities of the image; *fin du millennium* self-reflexive appropriation in avant-garde cinema has more to do with raiding the image-banks of the past in order to reconstruct a point of reference outside the imagescape that post-modernists like Jean Baudrillard find all-pervasive. These reappropriated aesthetic forms are not always of the variety derided by critics such as Fredric Jameson, who argues that recycling reflects a "[...] trend in contemporary consumerism, namely the return to the fifties, the nostalgia fad or what the French call 'la mode rétro,' in other words the deliberate substitution of the pastiche and imitation of past styles for the impossible invention of adequate contemporary or post-contemporary ones."¹³ Often, the reappropriation of images past is an attempt to articulate the present through an understanding of a past that may never have existed, but

4. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red 1983), 9.

5. The key text to analyse found footage film is William C. Wees' *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives 1993).

6. Marsh, 5.

7. Charlotte O'Sullivan, rev. of *Grease, Time Out* 1454 (1998), 75.

8. Paul Arthur, "Lost and Found in America: American Avant-Garde Film in the Eighties" in N. Voorhuis, ed. *A Passage Illuminated: The American Avant-Garde Film 1980-1990* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum 1991), 16.

9. Keith Sanborn, "Modern all too Modern," *Cinematograph* 3 (1988), 108.

10. Wees, 90.

11. Wees, 90-91.

12. Paul Arthur, "Bodies, Language, and the Impeachment of Vision: American Avant-Garde Film at Fifty," *Persistence of Vision* 11 (1995), 14.

13. Fredric Jameson, "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: *Dog Day Afternoon* as Political Film: in Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge 1990), 43.

nevertheless lives on in its detritus of images.

Some would deny this. Indeed, many contemporary post-modern theorists would claim that the reappropriation of what one could call "termite" or "detritus" images is simply more proof that we live in the age of simulation, where images increasingly slip away from any claim to referentiality. The proliferation of images, and of images based on images, is a frantic attempt to capture a "real" that has already succumbed to simulation. In this age, Baudrillard's writings become not speculative dystopias, but sad laments to an imagined era of referentiality, as Baudrillard himself notes in *The Evil Demon of Images*:

For some time now, in the dialectical relation between reality and images (that is, the relation that we wish to believe dialectical, readable from the real to the image and vice versa), the image has taken over and imposed its own immanent, ephemeral logic; an immoral logic without depth, beyond good and evil, beyond truth and falsity; a logic of extermination of its own referent, a logic of the implosion of meaning in which the message disappears on the horizon of the medium.¹⁴

Recent avant-garde filmmakers have moved away from this pessimistic view of contemporary imagescapes by exploring the tensions that exist within images themselves, their latent possibilities and the *ur*-texts embedded within them. Despite Baudrillard's claims, the process of image recycling seems to be as much about retrieving and rearticulating history as it is about reviving the dialectic between image and referent; as such, recycling has much more in common with three concepts which precede Baudrillard's post-modern simulacra: situationism, Soviet montage and the Frankfurt school's dialectical materialism.

Many of the new wave of avant-garde and underground filmmakers see their project explicitly in terms of recasting history through the *détournement* of industrial images from the dustbin of cinematic culture. For instance, Craig Baldwin's *Tribulation 99*, which, through the use of found footage and a voice-over narration, combines 1950s paranoia about communists, alien invaders and conspiracy theories, is a film which, David Sterritt notes, attempts to "[...] 'prove' the reality of two things: a mock-serious list of paranoid plots and demented conspiracies leading to the end of the world, and a dead-serious recognition of the mingled decadence and persuasiveness that characterised the mid-century American cultural scene and helped to shape the world we live in now."¹⁵ *Tribulation 99* therefore becomes an attempt not only to understand the past, but also to radically question the ways in which we internalise information without question. Further, the use of Cold War footage in *Tribulation 99* stems from a desire to get "[...] back to what I was certain had been destroyed in my mind and in my generation. It was very much a cinema of disgust."¹⁶ Baldwin maintains that twentieth century spectator's minds are so full of these cultural references that they can no longer make sense of them beyond the process of accumulation. His film is precisely an attempt to denaturalise this

process through humour and juxtaposition. At the 1995 Flaherty Seminar, Baldwin noted that:

I think a lot of material from pop culture *is* archival material: it represents a certain sensibility characteristic of the middle part of the century. I do collect stuff, but my "archive" comes mostly from dumpsters. Refuse is the archive of our times [...] I think we live in a post-Hollywood, post-industrial society. There's so much material already *there*, in the trash [...] that it's a test of our ingenuity to take that material and redeem it, so to speak: to project new meanings into it.¹⁷

This desire to tug at the seams of culture, to bring to light the relationship between film style and ideology in fifties propaganda and industrial film has many parallels with the model of cultural analysis Walter Benjamin developed in order to unravel the complexities of mass culture in the 1930s. Writing on Benjamin's project in 1928, Siegfried Kracauer outlined Benjamin's reasons for concentrating on the archaic aspects of culture:

Benjamin hardly ever tackles constructs and phenomena when they are in their prime, preferring instead to seek them out once they have entered the realm of the past. For him, living constructs and phenomena seem jumbled like a dream, whereas once they are in a state of disintegration they become clearer. Benjamin gathers his harvest from works and states of affairs that have died off, that are removed from their contemporary context. Since the most pressing life has left them, they become transparent, allowing the order of their essentialities to shine through them.¹⁸

For Benjamin, culture is what we exist within as historical subjects; mass culture is formed by the artefacts which, through their historical root and existence in the present, blow apart culture, leaving room for a radical, dialectical, historical materialism. This stands in opposition to Theodor Adorno's version of the role played by the artefacts produced by the *Kulturindustrie*. Nevertheless, Adorno understood Benjamin's project and thought it to be his greatest philosophical legacy. Susan Buck-Morss summarises Benjamin's argument as follows: "Benjamin was struck by an incontestable, empirical, fact: Consistently, when modern innovations appeared in modern history, they took the form of historical restitutions. New 'forms' cited the old ones out of context."¹⁹ But, unlike the post-modernists proceeding him, Benjamin did not look at this occurrence as the relativization of history. Instead, Benjamin argued that this was the way in which mass culture recontextualized the past in the present as a dialectical praxis. Benjamin's analysis is an attempt to "defossilize" objects in order to forefront a radical, dialectical break between past and present. Objects are both in a state of stasis, as they are pre-ascribed, and in flux, as they are forever being recontextualized. The object is not in a state of "becoming" or *Dasein*; instead the object changes as the culture changes. Yet, culture is radically altered by the his-

torical chaos caused by the mass cultural artefact's intrusion on the present. Buck-Morss describes the role played by mass cultural objects as follows:

As fore-history, the objects are prototypes, *Ur*-phenomena that can be recognised as precursors of the present, no matter how distant or estranged they now appear. Benjamin implies that if the fore-history of an object reveals its possibility (including its utopian potential), its after-history is that which, as an object of natural history, it has in fact become. Both are legible within the "monadological structure" of the historical object that has been "blasted free" of history's continuum.²⁰

The recasting and recontextualizing of detritus aesthetic forms is interesting here precisely because, once decontextualized, the image is seen as something historically concrete, not because of the referent connoted by its images, but because of its form and mode of production. For instance, Keith Sanborn claims that: "with the people of my generation [...] video represents the eternal present, film represents history. It represents this category of memory, of that which preceded us, in a way that TV or video does not."²¹ Yet this is a history that functions in the dialectical sense put forth by Benjamin, and not in the Rankéan manner foregrounded by most historiographical approaches. One can see this in the way by which Sanborn describes film as history: "Found footage is a very concrete form of history, and working with that kind of material gives you a chance to research in history, which has always been a fascinating topic for me: creating meaning in history or finding it—and creating things out of pre-existing material."²² Indeed, the practices of found footage filmmakers mirror the kind of cultural bricolage that Benjamin saw as being at the centre of his concept of the "dialectical image." One can also hear echoes of Benjamin the writings of commentators on the new avant-garde. For instance, filmmaker and archivist Sharon Sandusky writes:

The Archival Art Filmmaking process can be compared to archaeology, with the fundamental difference that the filmmaker's concern is with artefacts from an epoch approximating one's own lifetime rather than with those of a previous civilisation. This characterisation shares some features with another field that has been compared to archaeology, namely psychotherapy. Certain developers of psychotherapeutic techniques have used the language of archaeology to describe the *unearthing* of individual trauma. As applied to Archival Art Filmmaking, this psychotherapeutic archaeology can be seen as including the concepts of *burial* and *denial* in the unearthing of a film *trauma*.²³

Like Benjamin, the found footage archaeologist sees that the past and present are concurrently present within the object under question. Indeed, the parallels between Benjamin's goals and those of Baldwin in making *Tribulation 99* are many. Both are concerned with the dialectical relationship between the present and the past,

and both believe that the present can only be understood through the continuous rearticulation and repositioning of what we take to be the past. Baldwin states: "We're here in this post-industrial culture, and there is all this value in these shots thrown away and these old commercials and things, just trying to resurrect them and reinvest them with new meaning. [...] There's a political edge when you take the images of corporate media and turn them against themselves."²⁴ What this points to is a freeing of the cinema. This freedom is not one based on the old avant-garde's vision of a solitary artist striving to express his (typically) internalised visions. Instead, this freedom represents the unleashing of the *ur*-texts which are embodied in the masses of films which lie in the dustbin of cinematic history. As cinema enters its second century and we approach the end of the millennium, it seems particularly relevant that the past continues to haunt and embody the present of film. While Hollywood is still the dominant trope within the realm of the cinema, as time passes the refuse of a hundred years of cinema practice is, to greater and greater degrees, bringing to light the underbelly of the astronomical cultural and political shifts which have been the driving forces behind the twentieth century.

Notes

A shorter version of this essay was presented at the *Digging Chthonic Culture: An Archaeology of the Underground*, ca. 1997 conference, University of British Columbia, February 14-16, 1997. My most sincere thanks to Bill Wees for allowing me to sit in on his found-footage film screenings, for continuously bringing new avant-garde films and videos to my attention, and for patiently listening to all my thoughts on avant-garde film, no matter how off-the-wall they seem to be. Thanks also to Laura Bradshaw for providing the word "detritus" and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada for their financial support.

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14. Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, trans. Paul Patton and Paul Foss (Sydney: Power Publications 1987), 22-23.

15. David Skeritt, "Avant-Garde Film: Recent Trends and Key Works," *Blimp* 20 (1992), 25.

16. Andrew Hulktrans, "Collage Education: An Interview with Craig Baldwin," *Filmmaker* 4.2 (1996), 33.

17. MacDonald 1998, 176.

18. Siegfried Kracauer, "On the Writings of Walter Benjamin," in Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1989), 110.

19. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (MIT Press 1989), 110.

20. Buck-Morss, 219.

21. Wees, 89.

22. Wees, 90.

23. Sharon Sandusky, "The Archaeology of Redemption: Toward Archival Film," *Millennium Film Journal* 26 (1993), 5.

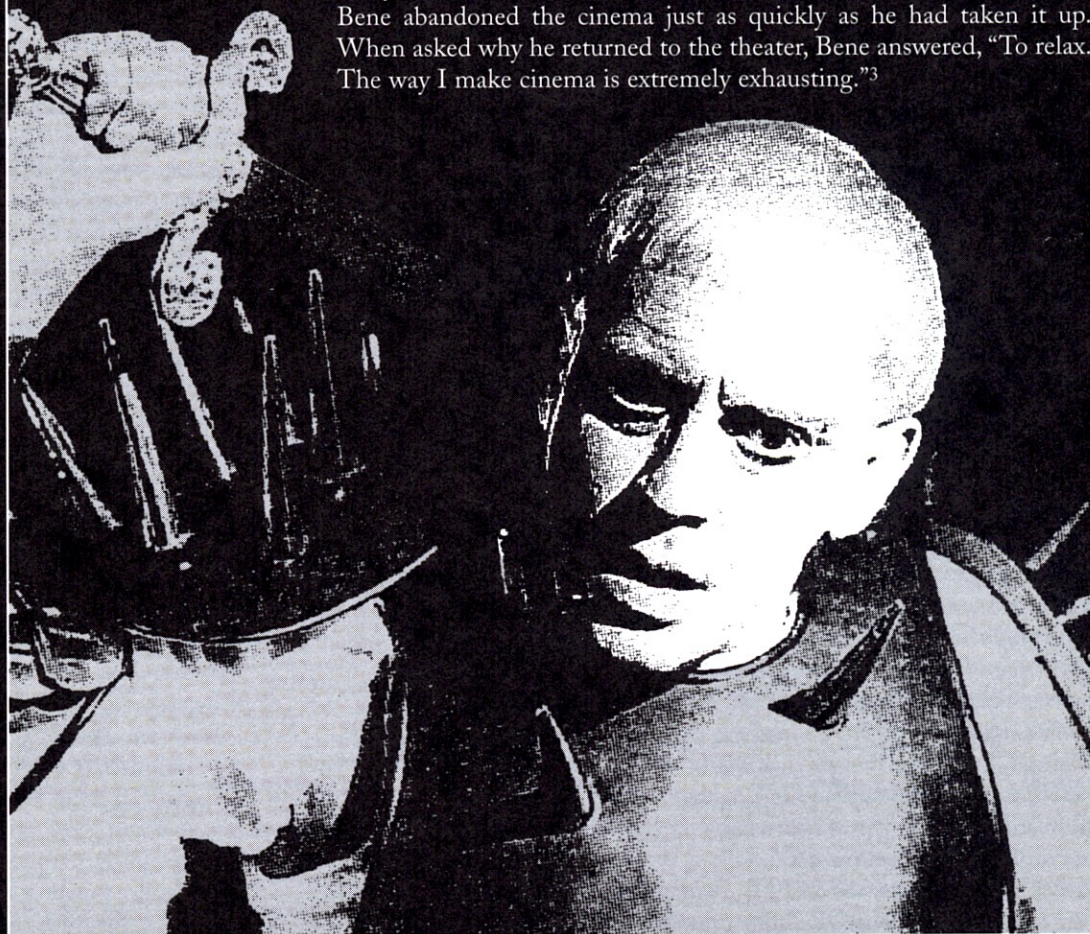
24. Wees, 68.

Contesting Cinema

A Carmelo Bene Project

by Marc Siegel

In 1968, after a decade as one of the most important figures in Italy's experimental theater scene, Carmelo Bene, performer, director, and playwright, abandoned the stage in order to focus on filmmaking. When asked why he turned to cinema, Bene replied, "Why not? If you've been eating for three years, you can drink one day; that's what cinema is for me."² Over the next five years, Bene, working outside traditional film production and distribution networks, produced five feature films and two shorts. His features—*Nostra Signora dei Turchi* (*Our Lady of the Turks*), 1968; *Capricci*, 1969; *Don Giovanni*, 1971; *Salomé*, 1972; and *Un Amleto di meno* (*One Less Hamlet*) 1973—played at Cannes and other international film festivals. Bene's almost single-handed efforts at producing, directing, writing, decorating, and performing in his films demanded an intense level of productivity that he eventually found difficult to maintain. In 1973, after making what many consider to be his most accomplished film, *Un Amleto di meno*, Bene abandoned the cinema just as quickly as he had taken it up. When asked why he returned to the theater, Bene answered, "To relax. The way I make cinema is extremely exhausting."³



Carmelo Bene in *Macbeth*, 1983

Indeed, the technical virtuosity and visual splendor of Bene's films immediately garnered praise from critics. After *Nostra Signora* received a special jury's prize at the Venice film festival, one Italian film critic, for example, noted that "in Italy, we have a genius. Do we deserve him?"⁴ For Henri Langlois of the Cinémathèque Française as well, Bene was a "genius" who offered tasty but challenging pleasures.

I can't think of Carmelo Bene's work without thinking of Sicilian torte, caramel, pistachio, almonds, honey and candied fruit...[his films] are filled with stones just as Sicilian tortes are filled with candied fruit. Some break your teeth, others are taken hold of and transformed into rubies.⁵

In a recent special issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma* that looks back on "Cinéma 1968," critic Thierry Lounas has suggested that Bene's five films "trace one of the most dazzling and radical trajectories in modern cinema."⁶

Nevertheless, despite few exceptions, Bene's films have received little critical attention and only occasional screenings since their period of production. The most extensive discussion of his work written in English is still Amos Vogel's 1974 book, *Film as a Subversive Art*. Placing Bene within a category he calls, "Expressionism: Cinema of Unrest," Vogel briefly praises three films, *Nostra Signora*, *Capricci*, and *Don Giovanni*, for their "visual density," "black humor," and "grotesque burlesque."⁷ In France, where Bene has continued to perform theatrically, his work has received slightly more commentary. Most significantly, Gilles Deleuze has written an extended essay on Bene's theater, "One Manifesto Less," that was published, together with Bene's script for *Richard III*, in a volume titled, *Superpositions*.⁸ Recently, Bene's films have screened in festivals in Paris and in Montreal.

In the following article, I will provide a brief introduction to Bene's theater and films and to his critical project of "contestation." I do so primarily with the aim of attracting further attention to this unique body of work. For Bene's films, which attest to the achievements of past cinematic experimentation, also resonate with some of the most interesting experimental work in recent years.

Contesting Theater

Carmelo Bene was born in 1937 to a middle class family in a seaside city in the region of Puglia in southern Italy. He first gained attention in the Italian theater world in the late 1950s, most notably through his unusual adaptation and perfor-

mance of Camus' *Caligula* in 1959. Founding his own theater company in 1961, Bene went on to create a scandal in the Italian art world with radical performances and stage productions in caves and small theaters around Rome. For Pier Paolo Pasolini, who cast Bene as Creon in the former's 1968 film, *Oedipus Rex*, Bene's theater was "autonomous and original." It was, according to Pasolini, the only bright spot in an experimental theater scene that had "succeeded in becoming equally as repulsive as the traditional theater."⁹

Throughout the 1960s, Bene's unlicensed performances were sometimes closed by the police. His reputation as a provocateur derived in no small part from an incident that took place during his 1963 production of *Christ 63*. At one moment during this piece, which was predominantly improvised, an Argentinean performer began a strip-tease, and, when nude, proceeded to urinate on stage and on the front row of the audience where the Argentinean ambassador was seated. The scandal made headlines and caused legal and political problems for Bene, who bemoaned the fact that the public was now distracted from what was really the scandal about his theater, namely the experimental theatrical practices enacted on stage.¹⁰

As with his films, Bene's theater is marked by his involvement at every level of production: as writer, director, performer, and set and costume designer. Gilles Deleuze has commented at length on the "critical" nature of Bene's the-

1. I would like to thank the following people for their assistance in preparing this essay: Sean Carle, Daniel Hendrickson, David Pendleton, and Erika Tasini.

2. Interview with Noël Simsolo, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 213 (Juin, 1969), 19. All translations from the French, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

3. Quoted in Ginette Herry, "Biographie artistique," *Carmelo Bene: Dramaturgie* (Paris: Editions Dramaturgie 1977), 126.

4. See excerpt from Oreste del Buono, "Il Male del Bene," in *Carmelo Bene: Opere* (Milan: Edizione Bompiani 1995), 1456. All translations from the Italian are by Daniel Hendrickson.

5. Henri Langlois, *Trois Cents Ans de Cinéma: Écrits* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma/Cinémathèque Française/FEMIS 1986), 343.

6. Thierry Lounas, "Que les vivants me pardonnent...": Interview with Carmelo Bene, *Cahiers du Cinéma/numéro hors-série "Cinéma 68"* (1998), 55.

7. Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (New York: Random House 1974), 56-7, 86-7. Bene also receives a listing in *The Companion to Italian Cinema* Ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith with James Hay and Gianni Volpi (London: Casell/BFI 1996), 21.

8. Carmelo Bene and Gilles Deleuze, *Superpositions* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit 1979). Deleuze's essay, translated into English by Alan Orenstein, appears in *The Deleuze Reader* Ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press 1993), 204-222. There is a brief discussion of Bene's films in Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. (Minneapolis: UMin Press 1989), 190-1.

9. See Pasolini's introduction to his play *Bestia da Stile* in *Porcile, Orgia, Bestia da Stile* (Milan: Garzanti 1979), 195-6.



Carmelo Bene in *Nostra Signora Dei Turchi*, 1969

ater, a theater that is largely based on pre-existing material. For Deleuze, Bene's stage productions are critical essays that interrogate the material that is adapted or "amputated" for the stage. Bene's work based on Shakespeare, for example, is

not a question of "criticizing" Shakespeare, nor of a play within a play, nor of a parody, nor of a new version of a play, etc. CB proceeds in a more original manner. Suppose that he amputates one of the component parts of the original play. He subtracts something from the original. To be precise, he does not call his play on Hamlet one more Hamlet, but like Laforgue, "one less Hamlet." He does not proceed by addition, but by subtraction, by amputation.¹¹

In Bene's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, he "amputates" the character of Romeo in order to allow for new potentialities within the play to emerge, in this case, the character of Mercutio who takes on a newfound importance, a new life, in Bene's production.

If Bene's scripts emerge through amputation of existing material, his staging is similarly marked by an act of subtraction. As he puts it, his theater is a "taking away of the scene (against the cultural industry of *mise en*)."¹² To this end, objects or set pieces are not employed on stage in a traditional way, say in order to add to the naturalism of an action or a situation, but as "handicaps" that stand in the way between an actor and the accomplishment of a task.¹³ Impeded from performing simple actions, Bene's actors, or "actorial machines"¹⁴ as he calls them, no longer act but evoke.¹⁵ The use of microphones and amplification further adds to the machinic, evocative quality of Bene's performers, whose voices now separated from human bodies, can achieve greater variety in pitch and intensity.

Bene's "taking away" of the scene means that his theater does not necessarily strive to communicate with the audience. "Communication," as he puts it, "is corruption."¹⁶ The impossibility of communication in the theater is nicely exemplified by his 1966 stage production of *Nostra Signora dei Turchi*. Adapted from his own 1965 historical and semi-autobiographical novel, the stage production featured a wall, with windows, at the proscenium where a curtain would normally be. The audience thus could not hear anything unless the actors decided to open a window and speak directly to them. By depriving the audience of the ability to connect actions with words, Bene sought to replace the habit of communication in the theater with the "total impossibility of communication."¹⁷ He thus did not lay traps only for his actors, but for the audience as well. By obstructing the conventional means of communication, Bene hoped to generate new possibilities for theatrical expression.

In this collision between that which I'm in the middle of saying and that which I'm in the middle of opposing to that which I'm in the middle of saying, a third thing arises which is the impossibility of theater, and hence the unrepresentable theater.¹⁸

Contesting Cinema

"While shooting, I contest myself, I contest my projects, their production and while doing that I contest everything, I contest the whole world."¹⁹

If Bene's contestation of theater challenged the primacy of spoken dialogue, his attack on cinematic communication was waged at the level of the image. Bene's films, distinguished by their aesthetic innovations and intelligent frivolity, are, as Deleuze notes, anything but "filmed theater."²⁰ Indeed, though continuing his project of contesting naturalist representation, Bene attended to cinema with a rigorous and thorough awareness of the specificities of the medium. *Nostra Signora dei Turchi* is a non-narrative series of reflections, with numerous shots from odd angles, of the cathedral at Otrante, and of the Saint Margherita, who the protagonist (Bene) attempts unsuccessfully to encounter. *Capricci* combines Manon and moments taken from the Elizabethan play, *Arden of Feversham*, in a series of suggestive sequences, most notably the interior scenes of an old man who is coughing and wheezing in bed with a naked young woman just out of reach beside him, and the exterior scenes of a series of car crashes in an open field. *Salomé*, based on Oscar Wilde's play, takes place in a pool colorfully illuminated by black light, and decorated with day-glo, cardboard palm trees and sparkling, jeweled costumes. Bene's perverse and mesmerizing spectacle features a naked, bald Salomé who emerges from the pool covered in jewels to confront a slobbering Herod with her lust for John the Baptist. *Don Giovanni*, based on the story, "Le plus bel amour de Don Juan," by the 19th century dandy Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly, is a kind of chamber piece in which a frustrated Don sits in a room contemplating a young girl who plucks the same note on her piano while she clutches a rosary. *Un Amleto di meno* weaves together Shakespeare, Jules Laforgue, and Freud in a striking visual display in which the characters' oversized, colorful costumes—suggestive of playing cards or pieces in a board game—are set off against a stark white, stagy background.

For Bene, challenging naturalist representation in cinema demanded that he contest the hegemony of the visual. All of his films feature an excessive number of shots—4500 in less than an hour for *Salomé*—odd angles, frequent zooms, and superimpositions. Through this "surgical indiscipline of montage,"²¹ as he referred to it, Bene strategically attempted to saturate or exceed the visual image. "I make music for the eyes."²² His soundtracks feature asynchronous sound; dialogue that is often whispered, declaimed, or stammered; excerpts from classical music and opera; and other heavily amplified sounds (breathing, wheezing, the slamming of doors, etc.). In Bene's films, in his "cinema as acoustic image" as he described it,²³ sound and voice are allowed to discover new expressive possibilities. As in his theater where amplification separated the voice from the performer's body, the intermingling of words, sounds, and noises on his soundtracks becomes, according to Erik Bullot, a kind of "sonorous prosthetic."²⁴ By challenging the relationship between sound and image then, Bene challenged as well the integrity of the

body and, thus, the connection between actor and character.

Throughout his films, a performer no longer seems to represent a character, but instead appears to struggle with a role, staging, as it were, his/her own decomposition. In *Salomé* for instance, Herodias seems engaged in a kind of struggle with a male servant as both characters speak the queen's dialogue. In other films, the sense of a character's decomposition is inscribed on the performer's body: the plaster encrusted faces of Don Giovanni and his lovers at the banquet or the mesmerizing images of Salomé peeling the skin/make-up off of Herod's face as she demands the head of John the Baptist. These images, together with many others in which characters drool or sloppily let food fall out of their mouths (Herod's apple, Don Giovanni's chicken bones, pasta in *Nostra Signora*), further break down the integrity of the body. Dominique Noquez suggests that *Nostra Signora* offers neither a character nor a "persona" or mask/facade of a character. Instead, Bene reveals the body's "insides, stretched out, streaked with blood, slobbery, [and] ill-formed, like an interminable stream of vomit."²⁵

The failure to get or to keep food in their mouths is part of a larger problem faced by the performers in Bene's films, namely their inability to complete an action that they begin. This inability manifests itself at every level of activity, from the execution of what is apparently a simple gesture to the accomplishment of a larger task. Indeed, if Bene's actorial machines evoke rather than act, it is in part because they contest the very gesture or action that they engage in. "You are in the middle of performing and at the moment when you perform you watch yourself performing...you watch your gestures, and in this very instant you perform a critical operation on yourself."²⁶ Perhaps the many shaking, hesitant gestures of Bene's characters are indicative of this critical operation on the self. We could cite for example, Don Giovanni's continually thwarted attempt to set down his teacup and saucer, his jiggling and spilling of the tea, or even the car crash sequence in *Capricci*, in which the "dead" bodies persist in repositioning themselves in order to appear more properly dead.²⁷ One of the most blatant, and notorious examples of the impossibility of a character to accomplish the task he has begun

10. See Herry, "Biographie artistique," 113-4. For another account of this incident and an appreciation of Bene's theater in general, see Mario Moretti, "Carmelo Bene Story," *Le Théâtre 1* (1970) Ed. Christian Bourgois, 180-193.

11. Deleuze, "One Manifesto Less," 204.

12. Bene, "Autografia d'un ritratto," in *Carmelo Bene: Opere*, xiii.

13. Quoted in Herry, 120.

14. Bene, "Autografia," xiv.

15. Bene has said, "The actor is not one who acts, but one who evokes." See Bene's interview with Thierry Lounas, "Que les vivants me pardonnent..." 59.

16. "Carmelo Bene: Fragments," Compiled by Jean-Paul Manganaro, in *Carmelo Bene: Dramaturgie*, 141.

17. Quoted in Herry, 120.

18. "Carmelo Bene: Fragments," 160.

19. Interview with Jean Narboni. *Cahiers du Cinéma* 206 (Novembre, 1968), 25.

20. Deleuze, "One Manifesto Less," 215.

21. Bene, "Autografia," xiii.

22. Interview with Noël Simolo, 19.

23. Bene, "Autografia," xiii.

24. Erik Bullot, "Sur quelques films de Carmelo Bene," *Trafic* 22 (Été, 1997), 70.

25. Dominique Noquez, *Le cinéma autrement* (Paris: Editions du Cerf 1987), 24-5.

26. Quoted in Herry, 115.



Don Giovanni, 1970

occurs in *Salomé*. Christ, with hammer and nail, attempts to crucify himself, and succeeds in nailing down his two feet and one hand, only to be confronted with the impossibility of nailing down his final hand.

Condemned never to complete what they have begun, Bene's stuttering, stumbling, and drooling actorial machines remain tentatively in the middle. Deleuze emphasizes the importance of the middle for Bene. "What is interesting is never the way someone starts or finishes. The interesting thing is the middle, what happens on the way."²⁸ For Bene, contesting something then does not mean opposing it. Rather, it means engaging with a gesture or an action—with the elements of cinematic representation—in order to undo it. For Deleuze the political significance of Bene's work resides in this critical attention to the middle, to the possibilities that an anticipated action might instead lead us elsewhere. "It is in the middle where one finds the becoming, the movement, the velocity, the vortex. The middle is not the mean, but on the contrary an excess. It is by the middle that things push."²⁹

One of the possibilities that Bene's cinema proposes is that heterosexual coupling should not be taken for granted. Indeed, his films abound with images suggesting the impossibility of heterosexual coupling. In *Capricci*, there is the sequence mentioned above in which a naked young woman lies asleep in bed next to a coughing old man. The man regards her with interest, but without the physical ability to move toward her. In *Nostra Signora*, a man in a suit of armor attempts to have sex with a naked woman, yet is unable to remove his metal outfit. Even *Salomé* is denied her coupling with John the Baptist's head. Instead her desire is used as means of unmasking (literally) Herod's own discomfort with

perverse sexuality. By turning heterosexual desire against itself, Bene's scenes of thwarted coupling become instead an interrogation of heterosexual male subjectivity. This is perhaps clearest in his "amputation" of the Don Juan legend.

In *Don Giovanni*, Bene, after Barbey d'Aureville, amputates the legend, so that the 1003 conquests of the *don* are reduced to one.³⁰ In this case, there is no more catalog, just a single woman and her daughter. The possibility of any kind of physical contact between Don Giovanni and the women, let alone any sexual coupling, is continually thwarted. The *don* sits in a chair, slobbering and leering at the young girl, a religious hysteric who is perched at the piano with her rosaries. The woman—alternately a mother figure and a maid—makes repeated efforts to approach and comfort the girl, but is unable to reach her. Instead, we see numerous images of the nude woman, reclining alone on her bed in postures that recall the female figure in the paintings of Titian, Velasquez, Botticelli, and Rembrandt. Denied his conquests, Bene's *don* is instead immobilized by the anti-sex hysteria of Catholicism and the unattainable, aestheticized female figure. According to Bene, Don Giovanni's conquest becomes his own downfall, a "swoon that undoes the illusion of any sex and of every relationship between the sexes."³¹ By stripping *Don Giovanni* of any "don-juanism," he turns this legend of heterosexual male promiscuity into an interrogation of heterosexual male subjectivity.

This discussion of the failure of heterosexuality in Bene's films suggests something of the political implications of his work. It should not, however, mislead us into linking Bene's project of contestation to an ideological critique. As Giuseppe Bartolucci has noted, Bene's is not an "ethico-ideological" project, but a "technico-formal" one.³² Bene does not set out to critique the institution of heterosexuality or the anti-sex hysteria of Catholicism. Rather, his "technico-formal" project of contesting the conventions of cinematic representation, of questioning the relationship between sound and image, actor and character, character and action, undoes the relationship between the sexes as well.

In this sense, Bene's films are not political cinema because they stage or represent preconstituted ideas or espouse political ideologies. Rather, his films, by deforming the process of representation, allow for new possibilities for conceiving of or even sensing the political. It is worth noting in this regard that Deleuze's often cited discussion of political and minority filmmaking in *Cinema II: The Time-Image* is inspired in part by Bene. Bene has said that he makes popular, ethnic theater, but that "it is the people who are missing."³³ Instead of attempting to represent an already existing people, Bene's work and that of the other minoritarian filmmakers discussed by Deleuze, attempt, through the systematic deformation of representation, to invent a people.

The extent of Bene's challenge to the elements of filmic representation escapes some critics who nostalgically praise (or is it condemn?) his work as a relic from a bygone period of experimentation. According to Erik Bullot, Bene's films fit in squarely with the end of the traditional avant-garde concern with form and with the end of any concerted theoretical challenge to cinematic signification. As he puts it, "today one



Capricci, 1969

could ask oneself why this questioning of form, this visualizing of the destruction of the sign, this insolent irony has so abruptly disappeared from the cinema, in favor of a massive return of narrative and its mastery, of psychology, of naturalism.³⁴ But, as I have argued, Bene's contestatory project did not involve merely questioning cinematic form. Furthermore, by acknowledging that cinematic experimentation can be more than just a questioning of form, and can, as is the case with Bene, involve an attack on performance, on the body as well, we might not need to be so nostalgic after all.

While Bullot suggests that Bene's work solidly marks the end of a period in experimental cinema, I propose instead that it hesitantly, sloppily indicates the middle. For Bene's "acoustic images" resonate with many that have come before and after his "cinematographic parenthesis," as he has recently described it.³⁵ There are indeed many affinities between Bene's theatricalized cinema and a performance-based tradition of experimental filmmaking, a tradition that links cinematic experimentation to a reinvention of the body. This tradition, which includes the work of the American underground, continues after the early 1970s to include some of the most interesting experimental work in recent years. I'm thinking particularly about the '70s feminist work of Ulrike Ottinger and Yvonne Rainer, the '80s work of the Black British film coops and other postcolonial filmmakers, the experimental films and videos of AIDS Activists, and the works of Derek Jarman and others associated with recent queer cinema.³⁶ What aligns this disparate group of films and filmmakers with Bene is a conviction that a political cinema must challenge the means of representation itself at every moment of its realization. This cinema must contest itself, its projects, their production, the entire world.

Far from seeming dated, from having its relevance restricted to an earlier time period, Bene's contestatory cinema instead speaks to the concerns of the present. Indeed, incorporating Bene's films into our history of recent cinematic experimentation will not only help provide a more complete picture of this history, but will also enable us to reconceive the possibilities for cinematic experimentation in the present.

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27. Bene's critical work on the gesture, his images of shaking, tentative movements, resonate with similar images in the American underground films of, for example, Jack Smith and Ron Rice. I'm thinking in particular of the floppy genitals in Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963) and Rice's *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (1965-7), but also of the close-ups of the shaking martini glass in Smith's *No President* (1967-9).

28. Deleuze, "One Manifesto Less," 207.

29. *Ibid.*, 208.

30. See Bene's fascinating discussion of *Don Giovanni* in his "Ma quelli che vedono, non vedono quello che vedono...", in *Carmelo Bene: Opere*, 1140-44.

31. *Ibid.*, 1142.

32. See excerpt from Giuseppe Bartolucci, "Per una lettura di Carmelo Bene dal sessanta al sessanta," in *Ibid.*, 1419.

33. Quoted in Herry, 113. For Deleuze's discussion, see *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 215-224.

34. Bullot, 70-1.

35. Quoted in Lounas, "Que les vivants me pardonnent...", 55.

36. It is worth noting the affinity between Bene's amputations and the oppositional filmmaking practices of some of those mentioned here, Derek Jarman "violations" of history for instance. As Jarman puts it in relation to his film based on Marlowe's *Edward II*, "how to make a film of a gay love affair and get it commissioned. Find an old dusty play and violate it.... The best lines in Marlowe sound like pop songs, and the worst, well, we've tried to spare you them." See his *Queer Edward II* (London: BFI, 1991).

Pedro Almodóvar

On the Verge of a Pornographic Space

by Brian K. Aurand

Very schematically: an opposition of meta-physical concepts... is never the face-to-face of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination. Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition and a general *displacement* of the system.

(Jacques Derrida)¹

Forewarn

The dry thesis of this essay is that Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar's cinema enacts such a Derridean double writing by its repetition of pornographic tropes in non-pornographic films (if we allow these categorizations to stand for the moment). In this process of context switching, Almodóvar's cinema challenges the role of the tropes in the first context as well as the second. It is in this way, by this double gesture of rewriting and erasing, that Almodóvar's cinema remains on the verge of the pornographic. Thus, by inhabiting this space between the pornographic and its other, the non-pornographic, the absence of the pornographic, it puts into question the



Almodóvar directing

very opposition of the concepts of the pornographic and the non-pornographic.

Texts such as *Matador* (1985-86), *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios/Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1987), *¡Atame! (Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!)* (1989), and *Kika* (1993) reproduce specific elements of mainstream heterosexual pornographic cinema, such as the "disembodied" female voice in sex scenes, the closure of space, and the "money shot" precisely to demonstrate the very iterability of these elements, the very fact that they are repeatable "written communication" in the terms which Derrida uses in his essay "Signature Event Context." For Derrida, iterability, with its possible etymological link to the Sanskrit *itara* (other),² has always been one of the connections between repetition and alterity which is capable of producing an overturning of the metaphysics of presence and its hierarchical oppositions. One of the major elements of these films is that these reproductions are never simple citations which quote their other genre identically; rather, they are rewritings of those elements which further demonstrate the constructed writing of pornographic as well as non-pornographic elements, and, thus, enact a displacement of not only the hierarchy but also the system.

Pornography as Counter Cinema

In a contesting of the dominant spectator theories of the 1970s and 80s, writings on pornography in the last ten years have effectively argued against the binary opposition of the

active male gaze working on the passive female object of photography and cinema. Such work as Laura Kipnis's reading of *Hustler* magazine as politically subversive, Linda Williams' and Berkeley Kaite's discussions of the link between pornographic tropes and difference, and the arguments against the univocality of pornographic tropes in the July, 1997 special issue of *Wide Angle* on pornography all challenge the earlier premises of the pornographic as simplistically exploitative in its representative and non-representative moments.

Kaite especially, in considering the problematic that female porn models are almost never shown completely undressed, argues from the position that "pornography is about textual, transgressive bodies" and that these bodies are "set into discourses of seduction and difference, although the boundaries of difference are continually transgressed."³ Kaite's rendering of the visual language of pornographic images in linguistic terms is a study of fetishization in contemporary pornographic photographs (with some film commentary) conspiring to seduce through a dressing up of models "in the fabric of culture's desire."⁴ Kaite asserts that a close reading of the actual photographs—and their contents of photographic breasts, anality, the gaze, and the shoe and jewelry—(in series or indi-

1. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982), 329.

2. Derrida 315.

3. Berkeley Kaite, *Pornography and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1995), 33.

4. Kaite 33.

Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, 1987





Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, 1987

vidually) shows how “the pornographic body confounds the boundaries of sexual difference.”⁵

This argument focuses on the construction of the “pornographic body” as something which is not real and does not give immediate visual access to the real. Rather, Kaite’s analysis shows, the pornographic body is most often “an ambisexual masquerade”⁶ in which feminine and masculine desire are exchanged precisely in the manufacture of the photographic pornographic body. The photographed female model is visually the full revelation of the feminine at first glance; however, it also possesses qualities which undo that first glance. It transgresses femininity in its linking of the single, erect breast or the emitting anus to the penis and in its assignment of the power of the gaze to the female or feminized model. Thus argues Kaite, the pornographic body “flirts with a dissolve around the ‘sexual fix’; it teases the critical edge of the great gender divide ... A simulated ambisexuality threatens the anatomy of binary structures which proportion gender identity on one side or the other.”⁷ This simulated moment is a movement which simulates the space between the image and the referent to reveal the “referent has gone missing.”⁸ Indeed, Kaite’s study directly challenges the assertions of simplistic, immediate, fixed gender identities and representations in pornographic film while also offering a reading of the inscription of pornographic bodies which proposes pornography as a textual challenge to oversimplification of any codification of gender and sexuality in general. The pornographic body challenges all levels of definition and delimitation of the body, whether medical, political, or cultural.

A Pornographic Romantic Fairy-Tale

In speaking to the question of the pornographic in *¡Atame!*, which some have argued is his most directly pornographic film, Almodóvar (who has written at least one adult audience book) has stated that, “*Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* is almost a romantic fairy-tale, but many people attacked it because they took it for precisely the kind of sado-masochist movie it isn’t.”⁹ Here Almodóvar speaks directly to a certain binary opposition between a romantic fairy-tale and a kind of sado-masochist movie, challenging viewers who place *¡Atame!* easily into one category or the other. Indeed, it may be possible to suggest that what this text works on is precisely that verge between the romantic and the pornographic—a divide which is so often evoked in definitions of one genre against the other. It is, very often, the lack of romance and surplus of sex which is cited as the primary characteristic of pornography while the lack of sex and surplus of romance is seen as definitive of the romantic comedy.

¡Atame!, however, is a rewriting of both genres, blurring the concepts of defining either category as it inscribes the pornographic within the romantic. This is especially shown through the scenes involving Marina in the bathtub with the toy scuba diver, the pornographic film of Marina’s earlier career as a “porno actress” watched by Maximo Espejo, the director of the horror film within the film, and the sex scene between Ricky and Marina after Ricky returns from the failed drug deal. At first glance, *¡Atame!* suggests it will follow the logic of the mainstream pornographic film in two ways. First, from

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the early, shielded, scene between Ricky and his female psychiatrist its narrative is established in terms of sex as exchange for other actions—as a way of thanking and/ or rewarding others which quotes a good number of pornographic films where goods or services are bought and paid for with fellatio, cunnilingus, or some other sexual activity. (Interestingly, this economy is not tied to simple active/passive roles in these scenes as very often the seller is paid off by allowing him or her to perform oral sex on the genitals of the buyer, thus rewriting fulfillment away from any simplistic definition based on achieving sexual climax. Giving oral sex is often tied to the pleasure of giving goods or services.)

Second, the film also appears to turn toward the pornographic structure of an initiation narrative, starting with the scene of Marina in the bathtub, with its full frontal nudity and implications that she is enjoying the scuba diver toy swimming against her pudendum and then vibrating between her breasts. If *¡Atame!* follows this pornographic logic, it will move from this view of the lonely, frustrated woman who is shown masturbating because she cannot overcome her repressions when any other is around, to her encounter and mentoring by some sexually “mature” initiator, to ever more complicated and taboo experiences with larger numbers of partners, to a final orgy event which will serve as her coming out party where she takes over as the initiator of some newly discovered ingenue. Thus, if it follows this pornographic narrative line, *¡Atame!* would be a window on the world of Marina’s rise in sexual and psychic power as she overcomes her earlier repressions and eventually sees all the pleasure they had kept her from attaining.

This narrative strand is left off by the film, however, when Marina exits the bath, leaving the scuba diver toy to bang against the side of the tub. This *marina* (shore, seacoast; marina) is as well endowed with and knowledgeable of *marina* (seamanship, nautical art, marine, sea affairs). She is not simply a port, and, as we see later in the film, is very much capable of taking the helm both in sexual acts and in relationships. As well, this narrative has already been undercut by our being told previously, through the dialogue between the director of the film within the film, Maximo Espejo, and an interviewer that Marina has been a drug addict and a porno actress. Despite Maximo’s demand that neither of these facts be spoken of again by the interviewer, this revelation has undercut the premise of Marina as an uninitiated sexual ingenue—a requirement for the narrative logic described above. Further, as Marina later states to Ricky, she is not alone and lonely as he would have it. Despite what he claims to be the reality, she has two families (a biological one and a cinema industry one) which chase after her throughout most of the film. The situation actually appears to be more that Marina is too surrounded, suffocated at times, by her admirers as well as her families (not necessarily two distinct categories, of course). Therefore, as certain pornographic premises are inscribed in the film, so too are they erased from it. The hints and set ups are there on one hand but just as quickly removed by the other.

Where the pornographic does come into *¡Atame!* most pointedly is in the scene where Maximo Espejo sits watching a segment from one of Marina’s earlier porno films. Despite

his wife’s requests that he do something with her, Maximo sits in a room alone, entranced by the image of Marina having sex on the screen. Here, too, though the pornographic is shown and not shown at the same time. Viewers of *¡Atame!* do not see more than the face and upper torso of Marina on the small screen; however, our full view is of the spectator within the film and his fixation on the visual image of the porno film. This *maximo* (great, chief) *espejo* (looking glass, mirror; a glass which shows forms reflected) in this scene inscribed with the aural track and partial image of a pornographic video reveals not only the iconography of the pornographic actress miming sexual ecstasy as she fondles her own breasts but also an image of a pornographic spectator.

In her study *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”* Linda Williams argues that one of the difficulties of pornography has been how exactly to show pleasure and especially the pleasure of the actresses. One of the key elements here is inscribed in the aural track according to Williams. It is the aural track and the female voice moaning and crying out during the sexual scenes which “may stand as the most prominent signifier of female pleasure in the absence of other, more visual assurances.”¹⁰ Indeed, it may be arguable that it is this aural element which signifies the pornographic in general more than any visual image of penetration, engulfment, or ejaculation. Therefore, as much as this scene in *¡Atame!* refuses full disclosure of the visual elements of the pornographic video Maximo watches, it fills the aural space with the pornographic “aural fetish of female pleasures we cannot see.”¹¹ The pornographic imposition of the moans from the video challenges here the speech of Maximo and his wife, who are not having sexual intercourse in the scene, for aural priority in a radical juxtaposition of the visual and the aural. Thus, the scene even more challenges the privilege of the visual in the film by setting this competition into play.

As well, the image of Marina in the video is made more complicated by Kaite’s reading of the image of the female breast in pornographic photographs. Here, as is also the case in Kaite’s survey, as Marina fondles her breasts only one breast at a time is visible. While Marina is lying on her back, the first breast with erect nipple is shown as the second is covered by her partially open blouse. Then, the first is covered by her hand as she rolls on her side, showing the second. These separated breasts in the diegetic space, argues Kaite, are a construction of the pornographic ambisexuality of the female model. It is the singular breast which is “part of a spectacular articulation of the body which re-presents femininity in partially phallic terms.”¹² The singular breast with its erect nipple is coded away from the femininity of breasts, a history of which Kaite discusses, and toward the phallic in an economy

5. Kaite 87.

6. Kaite 43.

7. Kaite 43.

8. Kaite 44.

9. Frédéric Strauss, ed., *Almodóvar on Almodóvar*, trans. Yves Baignères (London: Faber and Faber 1996), 102.

10. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1989), 122-3.

11. Williams 123.

12. Kaite 40.



Kika, 1993

which transforms "natural flesh to fetish."¹³ This transformation, then, is a partial phallic endowment of the breast, argues Kaite. This scene is not simply a revealing of the female body but is a pornographic inscribing of the female breast into new terms—terms which, as Kaite discusses, would question the very simplistic bifurcation of genders. Therefore, what the scene may well question is the position of the spectator here. Unable to move from his wheelchair and unable to reach Marina, due to her refusal of his advances as well as to her kidnapping by Ricky, Maximo is restrained to a space where all he is allowed access to is Marina's image and voice. (This is a space his wife does not enter as she speaks to him from the doorway only.) Furthermore, since the image from the porno video may call into question the very gender role of sexual initiator Maximo strives to put himself into, it may challenge Maximo's inscription as director of anything, let alone his sexuality. Confronted by the image of Marina's erect nipple and his own inabilities, Maximo's isolated space may signify what Maximo is not in comparison with Marina. It is in the "most pornographic" moment of the film, then, that the gender-power nexus is most problematic.

This looking glass, as well, is thrown up against the spectator of *¡Atame!* and works to return the gaze on Marina's body in the tub, slightly distorted by the screen of the water, and the presumed pleasure of Marina's face as she laughs while taking the bath. As much as that earlier scene hints at

the possibility of a pornographic narrative line, this scene reflects that presumption back at the spectator of *¡Atame!*, placing, after the fact, the spectator in a space adjacent to Maximo. If the earlier scene works to suture the spectator into the logic of the pornographic narrative, this later scene of Maximo watching works to untie that first suture. The possible suture of the first scene functions through the pornographic inscription of showing, first, the scuba diver toy against the pudendum and then between the breasts of Marina and then, second, the signifier of Marina's sexual pleasure in using the toy—her face with its growing smile and eventual laughter. The "guarantee" to the spectator is not only in the image of the sexual contact, but in the codified image of the woman's face and the sound of her voice.

This later scene doubly puts into question the pornographic inscription of the earlier one, however. On one level, by showing the spectator, Maximo, watching the porno film, by revealing that there is a spectator to that film and, thus, to the earlier scene by correlation, it reveals the iterability of the pornographic scene and its possible spectator positioning. By revealing the spectator later, it alludes to a spectator sooner. As well, the disjuncture of the soundtrack of the porno video, the disjuncture of the tonal quality of Marina's moans with the rest of the video's soundtrack, effectively reveals the post-synchronous recording of the sound and the illusion of that particular sound as a signifier of pleasure, thus introducing the

problematic that if Marina's pleasure in this scene is a pornographic trope, then her pleasure in the earlier one might be one also. It is in this way that the earlier scene's pornographic inscription of a textual body is put under erasure by the latter's pornographic writing and unwriting of a textual body.

This writing and unwriting of the signifiers of pleasure also comes into play in the scene between Marina and Ricky after Ricky's failed drug deal (a scene which almost got the film an X rating in the United States).¹⁴ While being the main sex scene of the film, in terms of the romantic narrative of the two lovers eventually recognizing their emotions for one another, it is also a subversion of the codes or pornographic inscriptions, from within a sex scene. As has already been noted, Marina is not the uninitiated and is more than capable of taking control of the sex act as she is the one who says she will insert the penis into her vagina and eventually takes the "top" position. As well, it is not the pain of her being penetrated which guides the care that must be taken. Rather, it is the pain of Ricky, who has been beaten by the drug dealers and whose sores show all over his body, which dictates the position and pace of their copulation and pleasure. In further rewriting the textual signifiers of pleasure, the typical domination of the female voice on the soundtrack¹⁵ is reversed as it is Marina who speaks most of the dialogue in subdued tones, while Ricky screams and moans out loud in pleasure and pain. And, against the realm of visual assurances of pleasure, both male and female, it is when she feels Ricky inside of her that Marina states she remembers him and recognizes him. As he has commented, his "cock" is the only thing his assailants left alone, yet his "cock," either penetrating, being penetrated, being engulfed or ejaculating, is not what is shown (neither in the opening shots nor in the shots of the mirrors over the bed) to signify pleasure. Rather, pleasure is re-inscribed in the pleasure of tactile contact and expressed via the dialogue of recognition on the soundtrack. At each point along the list of pornographic signifiers of pleasure, then, this scene rewrites the inscription. The scene quotes (mirrors) the pornographic almost trope for trope but reworks each trope almost to the point of erasing the pornographic in this scene. As Almodóvar has said, many people took this film "for precisely the kind of sado-masochist movie it isn't." This statement does not deny the sado-masochist movie it is. It corrects those who saw it and believed it could be easily placed in a seemingly known category while it was all along rewriting the very conventions that work to define such categorization.

Breaking the Binding

Along with these internal reflections, *¡Atame!* also turns the looking glass outward to other Almodóvar films and other considerations of the linking of the pornographic and the



Matador, 1995

non-pornographic. The porno video scene in *¡Atame!* also returns to the opening sequence of *Matador* where Diego, a *torrero* who has been prematurely retired from bullfighting because he was gored, is masturbating while watching slasher videos. In *¡Atame!*, Maximo is the director of low-budget horror films similar to the ones Diego, the director of a bullfighting school, is watching. Here, these films, both highly concerned with mirror images, cross paths. Both men are somehow wounded, Maximo by his stroke and Diego by being penetrated by a bull's horn, and both men are shown as the spectators of videos within the films, mirroring the spectating of the films. Like the porno video scene in *¡Atame!*, this slasher video scene also challenges gender alignments and assignments and opens both films to further questions concerning spectatorship like those generated by Carolyn Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* and Paul Julian Smith's "Pornography, Masculinity, Homosexuality: Almodóvar's *Matador* and *La ley del deseo*."

¡Atame! also can be read as a rewriting of Almodóvar's immediately preceding film, *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, challenging any univocal reading of Almodóvar's work in general. If at least in part *Mujeres* can be read as the story of Pepa's apartment as a woman's space of renewal and transformation once men are removed from it,¹⁶ then *¡Atame!* can be read as a text commenting on the solitude and danger of a space which can be easily invaded by a kidnapper—although the kidnapping also becomes complicated by

13. Kaite 40.

14. Strauss 102.

15. Williams 123.

16. see Peter William Evans, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown/Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, BFI Modern Classics (London: British Film Institute 1996).

Marina's statements to her sister, Lola, that she has fallen in love with her kidnapper, Ricky. Unlike Pepa's apartment, Marina's is the space of her attack and confinement just as *Mujeres*, by its very success, can be read as the film which led to a certain binding of Almodóvar by readings which tried to resolve the dilemma of whether he was a "woman's director" or a "misogynist." By challenging the very elements of *Mujeres*'s seeming empathy for women's lives in post-Franco Spain, *¡Atame!* works to return viewers to *Mujeres* for another read.

Of course, women on the verge of a nervous breakdown are always just that, women on the verge. As in the Spanish title, they are women "at the border." They remain at the limit, never quite crossing out of the bounds of the social, cultural, and personal breakdowns which surround them in the film. The men, too, inhabit, as Peter William Evans asserts, this space "if not of nervous breakdown then at least of structural fatigue"¹⁷ as they now face a society which shows them the very constructs of their lives. The point here is that in *Mujeres*, as in other Almodóvar films, the space of the challenges comes at the limit, at the outer margin. Its confrontations with codifications touch at the edges or boundaries of the system it works to displace.

Pepa, the central woman of *Mujeres*, is a character abused by men in the film, and the film's comical portrayal of that abuse would seem to leave the film open to attacks of misogyny. At the same time, however, it can be argued that the women in *Mujeres* are "presented as warm, attractive, feeling, sympathetic individuals, infinitely superior to the cold and calculating men who take advantage of them."¹⁸ The difficulty does not end with the narrative, though, as the cinematography and visual portrayal of Pepa must as well be considered. In one scene especially, the film shows its refusal of univocality. As Pepa changes outfits at one point, she asks her admirer Carlos to look away. At first, the camera is tied to Carlos's point of view. However, as he turns away, the camera moves to an objective view of a semi-nude Pepa changing clothes. The gaze denied in the narrative becomes immediately the gaze enacted by the camera position. What Carlos does not see, the spectators do. Also, the image of Candela, arguably the most marginal woman both in terms of the narrative and the visual elements of the film, as she attempts in one earlier scene to throw herself from Pepa's balcony, presumably to commit suicide, undercuts the predicament of her situation. Because she is fleeing from terrorists, the narrative might evoke a certain sympathy for Candela. However, with the image of her rescue showing her skirt pulled over her head, *Mujeres* might just as well be questioning the positioning of that sympathy.

A Farcical Pornographic Tale

Four years after *¡Atame!*, and following the production of *Tacones lejanos* (*High Heels*, 1991), *Kika* marks a return to investigating the disruption pornography causes when placed beside the non-pornographic. Although Almodóvar's cinema is not considered hard-core pornography by most, he has, of course, learned a good deal from it and has integrated that difference into his own work to question a sometimes more tra-

ditional cinema, most notably in the "money shot" in *Kika*.

The dual-pathed story of this film is quite traditional (and not unrelated to the romance narrative of *¡Atame!*) with its separate protagonists finally meeting in the end. One story line follows the adventures of a tabloid television show host, Andrea, who travels around Madrid with a camera mounted on her head so that she can shoot any scenes which may be of use. The other traces the police search after an escaped male pornography star / rapist, Paul Bazzo. Both these story lines circulate around, Kika, a make-up artist who lives with Ramón, a lingerie photographer, and whose cleaning lady, Juana, is really Paul Bazzo's sister. They come together as the television host arrives on the scene of the attempted police capture of the pornography star / rapist attacking Kika. Two of the conventions Almodóvar reinscribes here are the text-spectator positioning of the subjective camera and the conventions of space and the "money shot" in pornography.

Since he shows us portions of selected scenes through the head-mounted camera, Almodóvar makes literal the notion that camera placement and image are often located in imagined character position and hence viewer positioning. Like the video-viewing scenes in *¡Atame!* and *Matador*, these mounted-camera scenes in *Kika* challenge any simple reading of the spectator-text relationship. By showing us shots taken through this camera and then showing us the woman with the camera mounted on her head, this film makes the machinations of the suture system plain while at the same time revealing within the film a portion of the physical apparatus and the symbolic link that has always already been in the dominant cinema. According to traditional suture theory, shot one gets its meaning from shot two as shot two reveals who was doing the looking of shot one. However, in addition to making this ideological suturing of the classical style literal, *Kika* also problematizes the workings of the suture by often reversing the order of the signification of the shots. By sometimes showing the woman with her camera first and then showing the shot through the camera, the film may be putting into question the very temporal logic of the suture sequencing.

In addition to this play with the traditional, there is also a play with the pornographic through the way in which *Kika* both repeats and alters many of the conventions of mainstream, heterosexual pornographic films within this film which continually mimes the pornographic. The sequence in which the police fail to apprehend the escaped pornography star / rapist while the camera woman arrives at the apartment building is telling. In one section of her book *The Future Of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (1989), Constance Penley discusses the visual iconography of pornography and especially "the closed world of the typical pornographic scene"¹⁹ where all else is removed and where the space of the frame becomes tighter and tighter as the sex scene continues, usually ending in the close-up on the ejaculating penis or (and sometimes as well as) on the face of the moaning woman, signifying her pleasure in the "money shot."²⁰ One example of such a closure of space being a part of the pornographic iconography comes in the fellatio scene in Japanese director Nagisa Oshima's 1976 film *Ai no Corrida/ In the Realm of the*



Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses*, 1976

Senses. As a part of its attempt to push "obscenity" beyond itself, *Corrida* follows the inscribed structure that as the pornographic narrative logic is followed toward the horizon of the signification of the ejaculating penis, space is further and further limited to a concentration upon the contact of organs or mouth and organs. All outside the world of the bodily contact is seemingly removed, as the close-up is followed until the frame is filled with the image of ejaculate flowing out of the mouth of the woman and back onto the penis, reproducing the pornographic logic. Like the opening scenes of *¡Atame!*, one of the twists of *Kika* is the way in which it mimes this iconography until the very moment of the money shot itself, challenging the definition of the money shot as well as assumptions about the logic of pornographic space.

In the sequence of the money shot, the pornography star / rapist arrives at the apartment where his sister, Juana, is working as a housekeeper. Since he is desperate for food, money, and sex with a woman, Juana makes a deal for him to leave with the promise of sex, twice, later. Recalling differently Marina's statement to Ricky in *¡Atame!*, Juana demands, "tie me up, and knock me out while you rob the place." Once he has restrained her in the kitchen and knocked her unconscious in this Spanish farce, though, he cannot resist the other woman, Kika, sleeping in the bedroom. The camera follows him into the smaller spaces of the apartment and into the bedroom where he fondles and then mounts the woman while she remains asleep. Still a farce and a pornographic scene, the close-ups continue until Kika is awakened by the rapist on top of her. She resists, but he threatens her with a kitchen knife (recalling the pocket knife Angel "wields" in his attempted rape of Eva in *Matador*) and tells her that he is trying to beat

his own record of coming four times without pulling out. The camera closes in on her face as she asks him to please hurry up.

In order precisely to hurry him along, Kika begins to moan and reproduce the aural and visual inscriptions of arousal. Through the scene, then, her actions oscillate between directly resisting the rapist by hitting him and yelling at him to performing the pornographic arousal in order to end the ordeal. Kika attempts to turn her body into the textual body of the pornographic by reproducing the pornographic, all the while trying to produce in the rapist the inscribed, predicted result. The film's iteration of the pornographic, then, challenges the role of the pornographic by rewriting the pornographic scene, revealing its underlying construction of the signification of pleasure. The textual body can be copied precisely because it is written. Kika's performance rewrites the trope of the naturally always ready and able male pornography star, the illusion of the sexually potent rapist, the always aroused and ready female sexual partner, and the seemingly transparent link of sexual activity and woman's pleasure in pornographic cinema.

The sequence also raises questions about this relationship between the filmic and the real as Kika challenges the rapist's seemingly deluded statements about his sexual ability and irresistibility. The rapist asks Kika if he is any good, explaining to her that he is always highly complemented on the sets of his pornographic films. However, Kika responds, "This is not a film... this is an authentic rape." Recalling the Belgian artist René Magritte's painting, *L'usage de la parole I* (1928-9), this statement, because it comes within the film dialogue, puts to question the standard of a logic of non-contradiction by being nonsensical and sensical simultaneously. For the spectator this is another filmic rape and not an authentic one, there-

fore, an inscribed sex scene the same as in any pornographic film. However, for the speaker of the lines of dialogue, it is not a film but an authentic rape, and, thus, not the same as any pornographic film. Both on the level of the signification of pleasure and on that of differentiating the textual from the non-textual, *Kika* challenges any univocal judgements.

While repeating the pornographic here (and questioning the separation of the pornographic from the non-pornographic), *Kika* also refuses its logic through a certain opening of space. While the rape continues in the bedroom, the camera leaves the space, revealing the voyeur (the spectator within the film again) on the balcony across from Kika's and his phone call to the police at the station. The film cuts to that station and an extended conversation concerning feeling time and killing time. The sex scene continues as Paul Bazzo is still raping Kika, but the camera is not closed in on Kika's face or any small space in the room. Rather, the simultaneous inactions of the police station fill the screen. The police do arrive at the apartment to rescue Kika from the rapist, and after some effort they manage to pull the actor / rapist from on top of her. He runs to the balcony to masturbate and ejaculate over the railing. The sequence then cuts to the street below and the arriving camera woman who looks up toward the sixth-floor balcony with all the commotion only to be struck in the face by the ejaculate from above. Again the pornographic logic of the closure of space is shattered as the money shot takes place across a cut which signifies a space of seven stories between the penis and the face of the woman. Through this farce the film is able to both repeat pornographic iconographies of the closure of space and the money shot while also undoing both at the same time. The actor in this film ejaculates onto the face of a woman; however, the spacing and editing involved would seem to argue for a different reading than the traditional money shots of pornography.

Cinematic Displacement

It is through movements like these, through its challenging of spectator location, miming and undoing of the suture system, and reproducing and rewritings of iconographies of pornography that the cinema of Pedro Almodóvar both challenges and displaces the pornographic and the non-pornographic. The above comparison with Oshima and *Ai no Corrida* / *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) is by no means neutral as Oshima himself claimed with *Corrida* to be producing a pornographic film, "a film of sexual organs and sexual intercourse."²¹ Like Almodóvar,²² Oshima too has been a director questioned time and again by censors and critics alike for his treatment of sexuality and pornography. Like Almodóvar, also, Oshima's stated intention for producing pornographic films has been to overturn the binary opposition between "obscenity" and "art" in order to show that "obscenity" does not exist to begin with. Both directors in Derridean fashion, then, practice an *overturning* of their confronted opposition. However, it is in their second steps that they differ.

Oshima's practice around the time of the production of *Corrida* was very concerned with pushing obscenity to the limit of its definition. This film, according to his accounts, is

a challenge to the definition of obscenity by producing something more obscene than anything as yet produced. *Corrida* is a film that broke taboos, and as he states, "A film that broke taboos was, to me, a pornographic film."²³ By pushing the limits ever further with each production, Oshima implies a testing and eventual overturning of obscenity so that pornographic film can be taken seriously: "Only thus can 'obscenity' be rendered essentially meaningless."²⁴ Oshima's intention then, while overturning the opposition between art and obscenity, leaves the system—the logic of oppositional binaries—intact. His pushing of obscenity to its limit does not counter the actual separation and hierarchy between art and obscenity, but rather attempts a neutralization of "obscenity" by making it (and the taboo associated with "obscenity") disappear.²⁵ However, with the system still intact, as soon as obscenity is pushed to its limit, defined through its history, that history changes to incorporate the new limit as a moment *within* its limit and thus calls for yet another pushing of the limit. Oshima's strategy can push the limit continually or exit the debate completely, but both strategies result in leaving the original system in place.

One way of reading Almodóvar's texts, though, (as I am here proposing) is that they work more toward a general *displacement* of the system by confusing the boundaries between art and obscenity (if we can allow these terms to stand for the moment) by inscribing the one within the other and vice versa, thus destabilizing the binary opposition in terms of aesthetics of art and aesthetics of obscenity. By demonstrating, as these films of Almodóvar do, the iterability of both the artistic and the obscene through their quoting, *Kika*, *¡Atame!*, and others show the aesthetic ties of both facets of the aesthetic. By misquoting, as these films do, they also perform an undoing of the very constructs of these tropes and thus show the construction at their origin. Neither art nor obscenity has an essential quality here, but only a quality of opposition which relies upon its other in order to formulate itself. Thus the general system of this production of the artistic and the obscene can be opened and thus displaced.

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17. Evans 36.

18. Gwynne Edwards, *Indecent Exposures: Buñuel, Saura, Erice & Almodóvar* (London: Marion Boyars 1995), 191.

19. Constance Penley, *The Future Of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1989), 84.

20. see Linda Williams' discussion of the money shot as attempted signifier of female pleasure in *Hard Core*.

21. Nagisa Oshima, *Cinema, Censorship, and the State: The Writings of Nagisa Oshima 1956-1978*, trans. Dawn Lawson, ed. and intro. Annette Michelson (Cambridge: MIT Press 1992), 260.

22. See Edwards' discussion of the influence of *Corrida* on *Matador* on page 165.

23. Oshima 260.

24. Oshima 261.

25. Oshima 261.



A “Breakthrough” Film?

Hal Hartley’s *Henry Fool*

by Sarah Phillips

Hal Hartley’s new film, *Henry Fool*, has been acclaimed by some mainstream critics as his “breakthrough” work. Implicit in this critical reception is the notion that Hartley’s work up to this point has suffered from important inadequacies, in particular excessive self-consciousness and attention to form. For those of us who have been enthusiastic about Hartley’s earlier work, it may be tempting to respond with the suspicion that this new-found commercial success may have compromised his artistic vision. While avoiding so trite a reaction, I would like to question the view that with *Henry Fool*, Hartley has finally overcome his adolescent tendencies as a filmmaker and has made a “real” film.

In a review of Hal Hartley’s thriller *Amateur* (1994),¹ Richard Combs suggests that the amnesiac condition of Thomas, the protagonist is emblematic of Hartley’s filmmaking as a whole. “Thomas’ amnesia is Hartley’s repression,” Combs argues, “that special condition his films create of forgetting cinema’s past in order to create it afresh.” Combs defends Hartley’s spare, clean formalism against the charge of preciousness: instead of the “knowingness” of which he has often been accused, Hartley’s

1. *Times Literary Supplement* Feb. 3rd (1995).

minimalist visual aesthetic bespeaks a genuine interest in the possibility of new beginnings. In Combs' estimation, Hartley has made a virtue out of the necessity of producing films with small budgets that do not allow for the surplus of props that tend to clutter movie theatre screens. Combs warns, however, that "[a]s success inevitably boosts [Hartley's] production values...that repression may become both more urgent and difficult to achieve." *Henry Fool* testifies to this difficulty.

Henry Fool chronicles the sudden rise to fame of Simon Grim/James Urbaniak, a garbage man who lives with his invalid mother (Mary Porter) and mildly alcoholic sister Faye/Parker Posey in Queens. The catalyst for Simon's swift ascent is Henry Fool/Thomas Jay Ryan, a writer and ex-convict who moves into the Grims' dank basement and encourages Simon to put pen to paper. The result of Simon's literary effort is cataclysmic: his epic poem has a profound impact (sometimes beneficial, sometimes fatal) on all who read it. The controversial poem ultimately catapults Simon out of his stifling Queens existence and onto the Manhattan literary circuit. Meanwhile, Henry Fool experiences an equally swift descent as he is forced to take Simon's old job and to marry Simon's sister after he impregnates her.

Henry Fool is somewhat distinct from Hartley's previous efforts in its emphasis on *knowing* and particularly on *self-knowledge*. The central and most valorized act of the film is the autobiographical act. Henry Fool has made it his life's work to write his "Confession," and he influences Simon to do the same. (It should be noted, however, that none of the female characters engages in profound self-reflection. They are too busy being sexually abused or drinking themselves into a stupor.) The film is punctuated by confessional scenes: the priest who doubts, the young girl who reveals that she is being abused by her stepfather, and especially Henry Fool's disclosure of his past criminal acts. "I've been bad," he tells Simon.

In a key scene early on, Simon retrieves a battered copy of Wordsworth's poems from the garbage he is incinerating and peruses it as he drinks his Budweiser. He shows it to Henry, who complains that the version of the *Prelude* it contains is incomplete. The mention of Wordsworth here is significant, not only because Wordsworth's autobiographical poem is specifically cited, but also because it implicitly provides Hartley with an aesthetic argument that lends authority to his film. Simon Grim's competence and success as a poet are legitimated by Wordsworth's democratic belief that true poetry is the language of common man and should take as its subject matter "incidents and situations from common life." This line of argument is in keeping with Hartley's own goal of representing working-class life on the screen.² His films are populated by mechanics and waitresses who wear their names emblazoned on their uniforms and hang out in convenience stores. Hartley's thematic emphasis on autobiography seems to me to signal a subtle shift in his mode of characterization. In earlier work, Hartley's characters appear out of nowhere, are secretive or ignorant about their pasts, and divulge very little to one another. Instead, they forge relation-

ships by disregarding conventional niceties and introductions during which such biographical details would be provided. They seek a kind of trust or faith in one another that transcends and renders irrelevant such specificities. In this way they are utterly "flat" characters, devoid of the kind of biographical depth that more traditional narrative would demand.

Henry Fool to some extent moves away from this schematic approach to characterization, most obviously in the way it depicts the development of the protagonists *over time*. Years pass as we witness the ups and downs of Simon and Henry, the birth of Faye's son and so forth. This is a departure from the pattern set by Hartley's previous films, which tend to take place within the span of a few days or weeks. Ultimately, this attempt to broaden the temporal scope of the film was unsatisfying because it tended to result in a devaluation of the visual and a lack of attention to the moment.

Previously, Hartley's films collected together static "snapshot" images rather than focusing on more linear and dynamic, text-driven sequences. Verbal exchanges were denied that kind of forward-moving momentum by the actors' static delivery, and as often as not were about non-communication. Hartley writes in his preface to *Flirt* that "Film is essentially graphic for me."³ And indeed, the most potent images in the present film remain those that are the most silent: the mute woman played by Hartley's wife Miho Nikaidoh, Faye's young son with his sad, luminous face, and Simon himself in the first few scenes. In each of these cases, the visual effect of the character's unsmiling, motionless face is infinitely more expressive of his or her predicament than the three-dimensional treatments Henry and Simon receive. As a counterpart to this deemphasizing of the visual, Hartley has also dispensed with some of his most provocative formal techniques. While ample evidence remains of Hartley's skill in formal composition (the wedding scene in particular comes to mind), he shies away from the irreverent non-naturalism of the dance sequences in *Surviving Desire* and *Simple Men* or the balletic shooting scene in *Amateur* or the repetition of dialogue in *The Unbelievable Truth*. In the introduction to *Flirt* he had quoted Bresson's view that "The subject matter of a film is only a pretext. Form, much more than content, touches a viewer and elevates him"⁴. Yet *Henry Fool* lacks the formal tautness that was so effective in his prior films.

Not surprisingly, Hartley's increased fidelity to realism has been welcomed by some critics, especially those who had derided his earlier work as lacking spontaneity. In the New York Times, Janet Maslin called *Henry Fool* Hartley's "breakthrough film" – "a great American film" which "moves into a much larger realm than those of his earlier works."⁵ Stephen Holden echoes Maslin, heralding it as "an astounding leap beyond the polished whimsy of movies like *Flirt*."⁶ Hartley has indeed broken through, into a more dynamic and therefore more accessible, but also less questioning genre. The force of Hartley's previous films derived from the balance he struck between a rigidly formal aesthetic with strict attention to surface detail and a romantic, but sincere concern with the most fundamental human themes: faith, hope, love, trust, and



the possibility of redemption. This was a tenuous balance, and he was not always able to prevent his treatment of such themes from falling into cliché. What saved his films from melodrama was in fact their rigid formalism, a formalism that tempered his romanticism and ensured that the viewer maintained a critical distance from it. At its best, Hartley's aesthetic minimalism — his clearing away of clutter and his stripped down characterizations — allowed him to tap into something more elemental about the human relationships he portrayed. The very flatness of the films paradoxically provided access to a greater depth of feeling. Hence the poignancy and resonance, the moving quality that would seem to be so much at odds with the Brechtian alienation effects Hartley employs.

Henry Fool suffers from the consequences of a loosening of formal constraints. Without a defamiliarized presentation, cliché becomes little more than cliché. Henry Fool's megalomaniac insistence on his artistic genius and his subsequent exposure as a fraud — despite Henry's image of himself as a modern-day Socrates, it is the untutored Simon who is the true genius — feels formulaic. Similarly, Simon Grim's rise to fame, which culminates in his being awarded the Nobel

Prize, adheres to an American Dream trajectory that is little differentiated from that of conventional Hollywood narratives. Predictably, his ascent is a bumpy one which includes an initial rejection by a big shot publisher and moments of self-doubt. His receipt of the Nobel Prize has no hint of the absurd or comic but rather is taken at face value as a logical outcome within the narrative frame: "Promise me you'll be on that plane, Simon," his girlfriend implores. "I'll see you in Stockholm," Simon responds without a hint of irony. In Hartley's "breakthrough" work, formalism has made way for formula.

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2. See "Rise of an Indie: An Interview with Hal Hartley" *Cineaste* vol. XIX no 4 (1993).

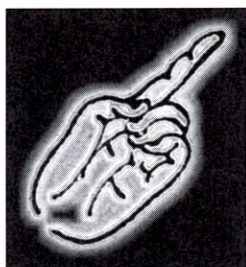
3. *Flirt* (London: Faber and Faber 1996), p. xix.

4. *Ibid.*, p. xii

5. "Of Faustian Wonders And a Mythic Queens" *New York Times*, June 19 (1998).

6. "It's Not All Comets, Asteroids And Giant Mutant Lizards" *New York Times*, July 3 (1998).





Edward Yang

A Taiwanese Independent Filmmaker in Conversation

by Shelly Kraicer and Lisa Roosen-Runge

Edward Yang



The films of Edward Yang (Yang Dechang) offer a perceptive critique of modern urban society from a unique point of view: contemporary Taiwan. Taiwanese society has been subjected to several waves of foreign influence: 50 years of Japanese occupation, from 1895 to 1945; Kuomintang dictatorship under Chiang Kai-shek and Nationalist refugees from the Chinese mainland who followed him in 1949; and a US military presence at the height of the Cold War. The end of martial law in 1987 marked an easing of government and self-censorship, as well as new cultural and economic exchanges with the West.

Yang was born in Shanghai in 1947. His family moved to Taiwan with the Nationalists in 1949. After studying in the United States for a year in 1974, and a subsequent eight year stint in the Seattle computer industry, he returned to Taiwan and began his filmmaking career. Since 1983, he has directed six feature films. He has been a teacher at the National Arts Institute, in the drama department headed by filmmaker Stan Lai. Yang has also directed theatre in Taiwan.

Along with Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou on the mainland, Tsui Hark and Wong Kar-wai in Hong Kong, and his compatriot Hou Hsiao-hsien in Taiwan, Edward Yang is one of a group of filmmakers who have brought Chinese film to international prominence. Unlike the others, however, he has not received recognition outside of Asia. Apart from the following he has in Japan, perhaps the only regular audiences for Yang's films have been international film festival-goers. Distribution at home is dismal for Taiwanese art house films.

We recently took the opportunity to interview Yang during the November 1997 retrospective organized by the Film Center of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The interview has been supplemented with paraphrases from Yang's introductions to his films, from question and answer sessions, and from a panel discussion. To distinguish these varying sources, the direct first person responses have been set in italics. Thanks to Barbara Scharres of the Art Institute of Chicago Film Center for her cooperation and assistance, and to Anna Roosen-Runge who transcribed the tape.

The Birth of the Taiwanese New Wave

Edward Yang absorbed European film culture while growing up in 1960s Taipei. The Kuomintang imported innumerable European films in order to bolster cultural and trade relations with allied countries in its campaign for diplomatic recognition. According to Yang, Taiwan got all the European art house films: Bresson, Fellini, Godard. In 1974, he went to the United States to study film at the University of Southern California, which he described as having adversely affected his development as a filmmaker. They taught film as very much a part of mainstream culture, but he wanted to be different. His self-confidence undermined, Yang dropped out of film school but stayed in the US designing computers in Seattle. There, in an art house cinema, Yang saw Werner Herzog's *Aguirre the Wrath of God* (1972), for him the perfect anti-film-school film, and he was remotivated. *All my friends are billionaires now in Seattle. If it wasn't for Herzog, I would be a rich man today!*

I have a friend, Yu Wei-cheng, whom I met when I was going to USC and he was going to a trade school in LA for filmmaking. I quit my computer job and went back to Taiwan when he asked me to write a script for him. A whole bunch of us started together on that project: The Winter of 1905 (1981). Now that I look at it, it was very fateful. It was my first project, and the first for the editor Chen Bo-wen, for the sound engineer Tu Du-che, for the producer Yu Wei-yen and for Tsui Hark as an actor. Tu Du-che is now the best sound engineer in Asia, and Chen Bo-wen is the best editor in Taiwan.

And it was almost the first project for Christopher Doyle.¹ But we had to hire a Japanese DP. Then when I began That Day on the Beach (1983), I insisted on having him as the DP even though he had done nothing before. I knew that he could do it. It was like a revolution, because you are trying to overthrow a certain way of management, so you have to make a lot of enemies. I didn't care at the time. As long as I make an interesting film I'll do anything. So that was the beginning.

I was the leader of the Taiwanese New Wave. Everything just happened in my house, a real old run down Japanese house. When I went back to Taiwan to make films in 1981, my parents had emigrated to the States. So I had this old house all to myself. All these guys would just gather in my house, talking and laughing and drinking: Hou Hsiao-hsien, Wu Nien-jen — just about all of them. You could just push open the door. We worked as a group. Everyone just wanted to do similar things. We weren't allowed to, and no one was willing to give us any money to, but we shared all these idealistic thoughts.

What encouraged us was the Hong Kong New Wave, which had started a few years earlier (ca. 1979). The Hong Kong New Wave is what made the Taiwanese New Wave possible. Absolutely, that's crucial, because Hong Kong cinema at the time already surpassed Taiwanese cinema commercially. Its members were making mainstream films that were also box office hits: Ann Hui, Allan Fong, Tsui Hark, Patrick Tam and Leong Po-chih. That made us a legitimate alternative to mainstream Taiwanese film.

Leong Po-chih was the first. I worked for him for quite a long

time writing scripts, in 1981 and 1982. He's British and he went to Hong Kong to start TVB [the main Shaw Brothers-owned Hong Kong commercial TV station]. His very first film was an action police film called Jumping Ash (1976). That's the first ever New Wave Hong Kong film. All the later action movies started from Jumping Ash. He really was my mentor. I am still inspired by a lot of things that he taught me. For instance, what do you do when you get on set. He constantly brought me along when we were working together. We always talked filmmaking: he was like a walking film school for me. I made up for all the years I missed [laughs]. He would tell me how to work with actors, how to work with camera people. And this is all before I started making films myself. He's so unselfish: that's how I treat my students. I just tell them everything that I know.

Terrorizer (1986)²

I didn't know my film was post-modern until I read what Jameson had written.

Yang responds to a question about Fredric Jameson's article, "Remapping Taipei" *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1992), in which the Marxist critic examines *Terrorizer* as a case study of what he called post-modern filmmaking in the industrialized third world.

Yang explained that he chose the English title *Terrorizer* deliberately, for its ambiguity, rather than, for example, *The Terrorist*, which might denote a specifically professional protagonist.

Before Terrorizer, I was doing darker, more dreary stories. I am confident that a dark story will make people treasure more the brighter side of life. The films depict the monotonous unchanged nature of this culture and lifestyle, what people are expecting you to do, which is not to do very much. All my films are trying to suggest that these characters could have been much better off. I think Terrorizer is a very optimistic film: if you have the stomach for something so hopeless, you have a better chance for resurrection.

A Brighter Summer Day (1991)³

Every citizen in Taiwan has to face a question: what are we going to do in the future — reunification or independence? No one wants to face it. This story is the background for what's going to happen in our future. I hope it helped. What is most special about Taiwan is exactly what is depicted in A Brighter Summer Day. In 1949, over 2 million Chinese immigrants moved to Taiwan from the mainland. Among those 2 million was a high percentage

1. Doyle is the Australian-born cinematographer renowned for his work in Chinese cinema, especially with Wong Kar-wai.

2. *Terrorizer*: A drama, a murder mystery (in which the murder occurs at the end), a study of modern urban alienation. *Terrorizer* intertwines the lives of an author, her husband, her publisher, a young photographer, a cop, and a female hoodlum in unpredictable ways, in a plot that is designed never completely to resolve.

3. *A Brighter Summer Day*: Yang's masterpiece: an epic youth drama, based on a famous murder in early 1960s Taipei. *A Brighter Summer Day* uses its four hour running time to build a richly layered world: there are rival gangs of wayward teenagers, mired in night school and lost in low-grade violence; their parents, uprooted from the mainland and still disoriented over ten years later; teen musicians inspired by Elvis; and a repressive bureaucratic apparatus that fails to keep anything in check.



of highly educated intellectuals and professionals. The pre-1949 Chinese professional pool split between the Communists who remained and the Nationalists who retreated to Taiwan. I was very fortunate to have been brought up by that generation. First, they knew [that the official government line of an imminent return to the mainland] was hopeless. So they gave us a lot. The school principal in *A Brighter Summer Day* is like my own, who gave me a very liberal education, which I appreciate to this day.

Yang went on to explain that his parents felt betrayed by what they had been told by the government. They knew that they had been cheated. They let the kids know that they should suspect authority. So, our generation never believed what the authorities told us. These influences really formed my generation, and made possible the Taiwanese New Wave. Asked about the prominence of American pop music in *A Brighter Summer Day*, Yang explained that the Kuomintang promoted US rock'n'roll music in opposition to "Communist" music on mainland radio. To the Taiwanese government, rock signified anti-communism. It functioned as a pro-government instrument that reinforced the alliance with the US. But it was the subversive side of rock'n'roll that affected his generation.

Regular commercial radio had programs about the US pop charts. This was very inspiring. This is what I've been depicting, this problem with our culture: that Chinese culture wants you to stay the same for thousands of years. American music and culture are quite critical for my generation. It was an alternative for us. It was a very accessible way of expressing rebellion. The good thing was there were new songs every week. This idea of something new, this is the source of inspiration. You can create something new every now and then; life is much more fun that way. The proof was the charts. This was actually wonderful; it inspired a whole lot of people, even though in the US pop charts are for making money.

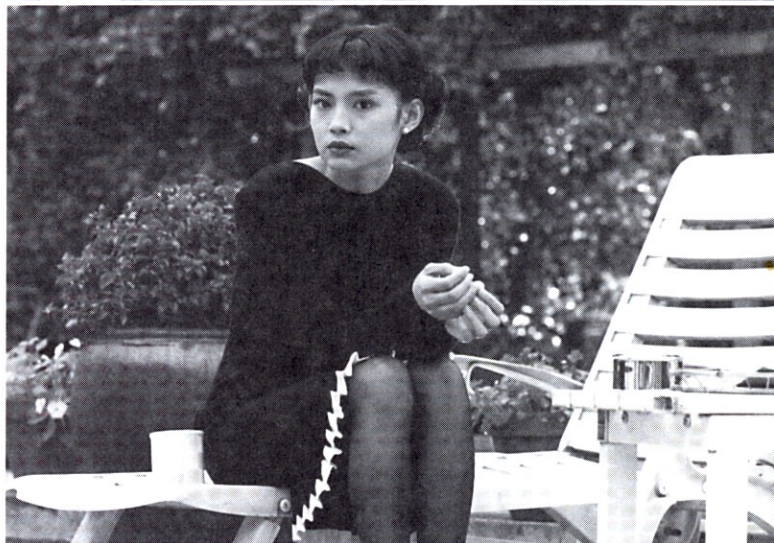
I think what's essential for *A Brighter Summer Day* is the idea that the father told his son that he believed one can change, that one can improve one's life through one's own efforts. I think that is very un-Chinese thinking. That's what the last generation has found through their sufferings: instead of trusting the system or trusting the culture, only you can help yourself.

***A Confucian Confusion* (1994)⁴**

According to Yang, *A Confucian Confusion* is about Taiwanese culture, Chinese conformist attitudes.

The only reason for a citizen to conform is for the convenience of authority. That's all there is to it. They want to stay in power, they want you to be obedient. They have the perfect excuse by bringing up Confucius. Because the great teacher says you should do this, so you do this. It's like Jesus said you have to do this, you do this, so

4. *A Confucian Confusion*: A post-modern comedy of manners that verges on farce, set over two days in contemporary Taipei. Yang's craft and ambition push soap-opera material into art-film. *A Confucian Confusion* portrays the simultaneous high-speed collapse of an intricately designed set of relationships among the upwardly mobile urban middle class: artists, bureaucrats, financiers, and media/advertising types. Order, ultimately, is restored, though no one is quite the same.



Three stills from *A Confucian Confusion*, 1994



Virginie Ledoyen in *Mahjong*, 1996



Chang Chen in *Mahjong*, 1996

no questions asked. Confucianism was promoted by those in power two thousand years ago, when China was unified for the first time by the first Emperor. The dynasty that unified China for the second time, hundreds of years later, revived Confucianism again. They had to put a lot of words in Confucius' mouth: everything has to have an order, a hierarchy: stick where you belong; don't think otherwise. So the whole of China is ruled by a kind of moral structure. But this always encouraged hypocrisy, because you always have to pretend you're thinking a certain way, when really you're not. Nevertheless we had a lot of room in our minds. On the outside you believed in Confucianism, you behaved like the next person, but on the inside there was lots of room in our minds for individuality. So there is an opportunity to think for yourself, to start to ask questions. The Chinese title of *A Confucian Confusion* means "independence era". You can use both titles to characterize what's going on in the film.

Taiwanese society has changed for the worst in the last ten years. On the outside, it's all money, all wealth; everyone is putting on new costumes, new clothes, new fashion, whatever. It shows we are well off. But on the inside we are going the other way.

The situation in all of Asia is terrible now. It's not an economic problem, it's not a financial problem, it's not a political problem, it's a serious cultural problem. *A Confucian Confusion* is the first and so far only attempt at self reflection: at examining what is wrong with trying to head into the 21st century with a 4th century BC ideology. Getting too bloody rich is the best way to make us all forget to face reality. I hope the current economic crisis will change that.

In the film, I identify partly with the character of the author [who is a once trendy, now reclusive, novelist]. He stands for some kind of conscience in society; what gets left behind by mainstream values, and he tries to stay optimistic.

Mahjong (1996)⁵

Mahjong for me is a post-Confucian confusion, a post-Confucian outlook on the future. The confusion is there, but for anyone not from Taiwan or Hong Kong or China, it is very difficult to see that we're at a most confused state right now. Culturally, economically, politically, every aspect of humanity is very confused right now. Everyone is.

The underworld in Taiwan is part of life. To put it in a nutshell, the concept of the police here in the US is a man riding on a horse, and if you're lost you get directions from him. When you leave he is very polite. He says goodbye to you. Whereas police in Chinese culture are the people who protect authority, not those who help the citizens. So to preserve law and order amongst the citizens, someone has to fill the void. These people were usually called mobs or gangsters, because they were not legal, but they were organized. They always filled a need in society, but they have never been legitimate. So these people, these organizations, will step in and perform the most basic functions, even in a democratized society [such as Taiwan's] whose police are not trained to do it. You don't read this in the Western press, because the Western press never suspected that things were structured this way. But this is unique to Chinese and to Japanese society. Law and order used to be maintained by the mobs, but now, because of democracy, you want



Mahjong, 1996

the police to fill this role. So the mobs are in the process of trying to be legitimate business people, but they still run a lot of things. The Taiwanese economy is about 40% an underground economy. I suspect that the government is either incapable or willingly incapable of eliminating this because otherwise there is no room for corruption, no room to put taxpayer's money into their own pockets.

But in this situation, the common folks really suffer. It encourages people to take advantage of others. If this situation isn't corrected, then I would say the government is similar to a mob. So it's no coincidence that every Taiwanese film has mobs and mobsters in it. And that's why in *Mahjong*, these gangsters are very professional. They collect salaries for their service, which happens to be collecting money or beating people up.

The kids, the future generation, are facing all this. After *Mahjong* was finished, parts of its plot became reality one after another, although at the time I wrote it, it was fiction. Now, it's in the headlines: some wealthy entrepreneur went bankrupt and killed his family; people started kidnapping for ransom; government officials and opposition politicians were involved in religious scams. It's just bound to happen, especially the religious scams, because we have lost everything. Everyday citizens have lost their spiritual focus. They need someone to cheat them. Cash is the only value they can see right now. And no one besides the filmmakers are depicting this.

The film has a hopeful ending, rather than a "happy ending", because the scene that came just before is so dark, so incredibly hopeless, especially when *Redfish* is so enraged that he commits a

5. *Mahjong*: A young Parisienne, adrift in Taipei, falls in with a group of teenage hustlers who introduce her to a post-capitalist city full of corrupt businessmen and cynical Westerners. *Mahjong* manages to mix broad comedy and terrifying violence into its nightmare vision of a commodified society's underworld.



That Day on the Beach, 1983



Sylvia Chang in *That Day on the Beach*, 1983

murder. The subject of Mahjong is the next generation, its outlook on the future, that's not confused or polluted by the present trends of advertising and commercialism. For instance, one prominent phrase in Mahjong is "all women are trouble". That's an advertising catch phrase. Just think if you had that on television. Most advertising lines are like that: they want you to behave a certain way, so you grab the money in your pocket and give it to them. The ending of Mahjong is a defiance of that catch phrase. "I like this person. I just want to kiss her. To hell with it. Fuck everything else".

Independent filmmaking and distribution

The idea of national cinema is getting less and less meaningful. An individual filmmaker's personality, his or her viewpoint is more important. When you really have something to say, people will be ready to listen, whether they are Chinese or Japanese or whatever. A lot of people hide behind ethnicity: I can't understand that. I'm always interested in new ideas, new things: that's of course very un-Chinese. Chinese culture says Confucius must know everything, therefore there's not much room left for new things.

It's almost impossible to show my films, or any non-Hollywood films, in Taiwan. This is true everywhere in the world. I don't do anything to get my films shown there; I don't want them shown in Taiwan [laughs]. I try to show them in Japan or elsewhere. The investors for Mahjong were from Japan. I have a good market in Japan for my films, and for distribution in other countries.

Film distribution in Taiwan is very much part of the under-

ground economy. You don't know how much money these people make, tax-free, because they don't report it to any of the government tax agencies. That's why I suspect there is an intentional or coincidental effort not to make the regulations healthy enough to protect the everyday citizen. This is the best way for the government to implement thought control these days. Filmmakers can talk back to the government, make all the films they want, but the government doesn't even have to censor them. The films just don't get shown. What's worse is those of us now working this field have much less courage to speak up. If we do, we will be excluded from this profit cycle, and probably end up with very low pay and very few jobs. This is another form of terror, just like grabbing you and asking you all sorts of questions to try to make you confess. It works the same way. The audience I have in mind is no longer just Taiwanese people: it's just cinema going people wherever they are. I have to do it that way. I've been happy with that kind of attitude since early on, since *Taipei Story* (1985).

Starting with *Terrorizer*, Yang decided to be responsible for everything by himself. That is true independent filmmaking. He projects his world sales, then creates a budget that's slightly lower. He describes maintaining one's independence as a cost minus kind of situation. The cost of making films in Taiwan has increased four to five times in the last few years, and few people remain in this line of work any more, because it's not as rewarding. Yang asks, *One can always make a film with this approach, but is it worth it?*

95% of films in the world are not created by filmmakers, but by the people with the money. The remaining 5% are made by the only truly independent directors.

People around the world now are only interested in buying films in English: non-English films just aren't selling, no matter how many awards you win. So the distributors control what can be made. Once the stakes are so high (with \$100 million US budgets), mainstream films become more and more alike. Then independent innovative films will become more obvious, they'll be able to make a greater impression. I think I'm an optimist. I think that in the future, Taiwanese will want to appreciate their own cinema.

Creativity is first how are you going to tell a story and second, how are you going to convince a friend to lend you the money. That's also creativity.

Yang says he is flexible, using whatever resources are available: that therefore he's a realist. Realist techniques come from low budget constraints. He feels he is working in the same type of conditions as the post-war Italian filmmakers, or modern US independents.

Cinematography is 90% lighting. Yang says he works very closely with the director of photography, using very little artificial light, trying to make the lighting as natural as possible.

Yang's generation of filmmakers never lost confidence in itself. That is why they are still making films in Taiwan; otherwise they would be working in Hollywood, he said. The current production of films in Taiwan has slowed to an almost non-existent level. Government subsidies are not working well. Yang says, however, that the creative potential is limit-

less. There is both a plus and a minus side to this situation. There are fewer restrictions for young filmmakers: they have no examples to follow; they can use all available means; they have less competition.

The present day problem is that no one is willing to let younger generation filmmakers make films. Because there is no track record. There are no previous examples to attract the industry guys to say "I'll put my money on this kid."

Other Chinese filmmakers

One of my students, Chen Yi-wen, is very good. He was actually one of my actors: Horsecart the assassin, in A Brighter Summer Day, and Liren (the fired bureaucrat) in A Confucian Confusion. He's shooting a very low budget film right now, which will be in competition this year at the 1998 San Sebastián International Film Festival.

As for mainland directors, Tian Zhuangzhuang (The Horse Thief, 1986; The Blue Kite, 1993) is the only one I respect, for his outlook on humanity. I'm glad that he wasn't killed by his schoolmates during the Cultural Revolution. I was so against Zhang Yimou's Raise the Red Lantern (1991). In China, the women ... the texture of women's lives ... is far more interesting than how they are exploited by men. Men are actually very stupid in Chinese society. Most of them are actually manipulated by women. Raise the Red Lantern would have been a much more interesting drama for me if it showed how the four women jockey into position for the husband's favour. I haven't seen that much of the sixth generation of mainland directors. I wasn't that impressed with the earlier works that I saw. Some of my students are very interested in their work, but it is never shown in Taiwan.

Yang's next film

My next project is about young people: it will be a thriller, set between Los Angeles and Taipei, using basically an Asian-American cast. Instead of using gangsters, I try to create the suspense and thrill from self-destructive behaviour. There are too many mob-related plots. It's getting boring. I think ordinary people are just as violent, sometimes just as bad or even worse. In the film, I'd like to address my hope for the next generation, that they find human understanding and longing.

Shelly Kraicer writes from Toronto on films from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. His web site on Chinese cinema can be found at <http://www.interlog.com/~kraicer>.

Lisa Roosen-Runge works in specialty television and endeavours to keep up with new Hong Kong films at the last remaining first-run cinema in Toronto.

Edward Yang Filmography (with pinyin titles)

- 1981 *Floating Weeds* (Fu ping) made for TV
- 1982 *Expectations* (Zhi wang) a segment of *In Our Time* (Guang yin de gu shi)
- 1983 *That Day on the Beach* (Hai tan de yi tian)
- 1985 *Taipei Story* (Qing mei zhu ma)
- 1986 *Terrorizer* (Kong bu fen zi)
- 1991 *A Brighter Summer Day* (Gu ling jie shao nian sha ren shi jian)
- 1994 *A Confucian Confusion* (Du li shi dai)
- 1996 *Mahjong* (Ma jiang)

Commercialism and Nationalism

Chinese Cinema's First Wave of Entertainment Films

by Ying Zhu

Introduction

Chinese cinema has been going through a series of institutional restructurings since the mid 1980s to cope with the demands of the market economy ushered in by the Chinese government. The upshot has been the commercialization and decentralization of a formerly state-subsidized film industry. Competing with imported blockbusters for domestic market share, some Chinese filmmakers have turned to Hollywood for inspiration, imitating Hollywood's big budget, high tech entertainment formula. The resulting surge in domestic entertainment fare has incited nationalistic sentiment among the cultural critics and some industrial practitioners in favor of a cinema with more cultural significance. Chinese cinema is thus caught between economic ambition to capture the domestic market occupied by the Hollywood-led imports and cultural ambition to produce films with Chinese characteristics. The current ten-



Street Angels, 1937
(Bright Star Productions)

sion between commercialism and nationalism has its parallel in the early development of Chinese cinema, especially from 1922 to 1931, another time when competition from Hollywood cast a shadow on the domestic screen.

The fitful courtship between commercialism and nationalism is particularly pronounced during periods of Hollywood's dominance. At times antagonistic, while threatened by Hollywood, nationalism argues for protecting China's cultural identity by protecting its domestic cultural market. Commercialism, on the other hand, offers a strategic solution (however partial) for winning back market share by producing popular entertainment pictures. Viewed from this perspective, nationalism helps to justify the rise of commercialism, yet the latter eventually incites the resurgence of nationalism. Such is the case of Chinese cinema's first and the most recent "entertainment picture" waves. After offering a brief summary of the current developments, I will zero in on this early Chinese cinema, with major attention given to the dynamic interplay between commercialism and nationalism reflected in its industrial practice and its popular genres. Such a dynamic arises from cinema's dual function as both a cultural and commercial entity that serves to enlighten and at the same time entertain the masses.

Chinese Cinema in the Era of China's Economic Reform

Since the mid 1980s, as China's economic reform policies reprising market economy penetrates further into the cultural industries, the Chinese film industry has undergone a functional transition and a series of institutional restructurings. Film was re-defined in 1984 as a cultural industry rather than a propaganda institution for the (re)enforcement of the Party's ideology. The consequences of this functional redefinition have been sweet and sour; while enjoying a greater degree of creative autonomy, the studios, no longer qualifying for substantial governmental subsidies yet still overburdened by the deadweight of a Soviet style institutional structure, have been left alone to fend for themselves in an increasingly competitive cultural market. Chinese cinema has since witnessed dramatic declines in both its audience and its flows of capital and creative forces.¹ Still considered part of the propaganda machinery and hence qualified for the generous financial support from the government, the semi-advertiser-supported Chinese television, on the other hand, has enjoyed huge gains in both its overall program ratings and its capacity to produce programming for multiple channels and longer hours. Many filmmakers have consequently turned to television for its more accessible capital and higher profit.²

The central government has introduced a series of provisional reform policies to cope with the crisis. The goal is to resuscitate the beleaguered studios not through state subsidies but through streamlining bureaucracy, eliminating waste, and further commercialization. The studios are allowed, indeed encouraged, to produce quality entertainment films with competitive market value. The early stage of institutional restructuring had been partial and haphazard, without a coherent package, reflecting the old Chinese saying: "crossing the river by touching the boulder." The restructuring reached

its peak in 1993 when the Ministry of Radio/TV/Film decided to decentralize its decades-long monopoly on distribution. The decentralization of distribution pushed film production further towards the market economy, since from then on the local distribution companies would no longer be held responsible for the unmarketable films produced by the big studios. The distribution reform, while inciting competition among and within the studios to produce entertainment films, did not result in pictures that performed better at the box-office. Overall revenue remained slim and production capital remained remote. In order to boost theater attendance, the Ministry of Radio/TV/Film in 1994 issued a document to allow the annual importation of ten international blockbusters, most of them big budget, high-tech Hollywood fare. Since then, Hollywood blockbusters like *True Lies*,³ *Forrest Gump*, *The Lion King*, *Independence Day*, etc., have dominated the Chinese film market. The ten big imports restored the theater-going habit of Chinese audiences and generated huge box-office revenues. Predictably, Hollywood's strong entry into the Chinese market has since sparked industrial and critical debate concerning its impact on the future direction of Chinese cinema.

Hollywood's newly realized Chinese triumph has not extended into television. The Chinese public, in a home viewing setting, still seem to prefer domestically produced programs with more immediate cultural relevance to their day to day living conditions. Yet a recent report indicates that with the creation of the movie channel on Chinese Central Television (CCTV) and other local stations, many college-educated viewers have turned their attention to old Hollywood films on cable.⁴ Questions concerning how to compete with Hollywood for China's domestic market inevitably pop up. The issue has instigated a renewed sense of nationalism within the Chinese film industry and among certain segments of the Chinese intelligentsia. The nationalist sentiment is coupled with a realization of the necessity of a commercialized institutional practice based on the principles of market economy. Nationalism and commercialism justify each other and converge in the industrial practitioners' attempts to adopt a Hollywood style institutional practice and narrative paradigm to counter Hollywood.⁵

Debates have raged among the industrial practitioners, cultural critics, and policy makers as to whether the restructuring of Chinese cinema must follow the mode of produc-

1. Chris Berry provides detailed statistics concerning audience attendance in his article "Market Forces: China's 'Fifth Generation' faces the bottom line", in Chris Berry (ed.) *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (1991), p115. Also, according to China Entertainment Network News, a total figure for national box-office for 1997 revealed a figure of 1.56 billion yuan (200 million dollars), but only 22% of that went to domestic films.

2. When I conducted my interviews with cultural critics, policy makers, and industrial practitioners in China in the summer of 1997, accomplished film makers, notably Zhang Junzhao (*One and Eight*), Teng Wenji (*Reverberation of Life*), Cheng Jialin (*The Last Empress*), etc., were all making TV dramas. The only notable filmmakers I talked with who had not yet turned to television for refuge were Huang Jianxing (*Black Cannon Incident*) and He Ping (*Red Firecrackers*, *Green Firecrackers*).

3. This film has set the foreign-film record of \$1.9 million in China up until 1997. Now *Titanic* is expected to surpass the record.

4. See Zhang Tongdao's report in *Film Art* (96/2), p. 51.



Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhenqui, two of Bright Star's directors

tion defined by Hollywood. Is imitating Hollywood's big budget, high tech production mentality the only way for Chinese filmmakers to win back their domestic market? At the center of the debate is the question about the transnational production practice of the Chinese 5th Generation filmmakers.⁶ In their striving for both international recognition and overseas financial support, are some of China's best and brightest New Wave filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou (*Shanghai Triad*) and Chen Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine*) selling out to the globalized cinematic paradigm institutionalized by Hollywood? In other words, has the commercialization and globalization of Chinese art cinema resulted in the deprivation of Chinese cinema's cultural identity?

At the core of the debates concerning the current transformation of Chinese cinema is the issue of the feasibility of a cinematic landscape comprising cinemas of various national or regional origins at both the transnational and national levels. The importance of cinematic multiculturalism is rarely challenged on ecological and moral grounds, but the question remains as to how to protect cinematic diversity. More specifically, what role has the State assumed and what strategy has the industry pursued in order to strike a balance between the local and the global. The plausibility of preserving cinemas of various cultural origins on grounds of political economy as well as cultural heritage has yet to be explored. A look at Chinese cinema's early commercial practice may shed some light on Chinese cinema's current development in particular and on the development of regional cinemas under Hollywood's shadow in general.

Chinese Cinema's Early Development

The fledgling Chinese national cinema had a long, difficult beginning. Film was introduced to China in 1896. Early motion pictures in China were imports from Europe, mostly from France. Early distributors were foreign merchants tempted by China's potential market who ventured into film exhibition in China's big cosmopolitan cities. Native exhibitors did not emerge until 1903 when a Chinese merchant, Lin Zhushan, screened films he brought back from the US and Europe at a tea house in Beijing. The first Chinese film was made in 1905 by a photo shop owner, Ren Qingtai, also in Beijing.⁷ The first real theater, Pingan Theater, was built in Beijing two years later by foreign merchants, and served only foreign patrons, reflecting the "No dogs or Chinese are allowed" colonial mentality. In 1909, an American merchant, Benjamin Brodsky, founded the first production company, Asia Film Company, in China.⁸ Brodsky's production venture inspired Chinese theater lovers. In 1913, some Chinese stage directors and actors in Shanghai formed Xingming, a director-unit style production company contracted by Asia Film. The same year Xingming produced *A Difficult Couple*, a narrative short. The film was a social satire portraying the absurdity of a feudal marriage. Another native production company, Huamei, was formed in the same year by the wealthy Li brothers in Hong Kong. Huamei produced *Zhuangzhi Tests His Wife* in 1913, another narrative short, also a social satire. The film was a popular hit and became the first Chinese export, introduced to the US by Brodsky.⁹ Early Chinese directors considered cinema a tool

for social reform, inheriting the Confucian idea of entertainment for pedagogical purpose. Chinese film pioneers' aspiration of "using cinema to save the nation"¹⁰ was evidence of the germinating courtship between Chinese cinema and Chinese nationalism. Early Chinese domestic productions were mostly co-productions, dependent on foreign capital and technology. The native film industry was hence largely limited to the treaty ports where such capital and technology were the most accessible.

The end of WWI brought an economic recovery that made domestic capital available for film production. As the popularity of motion pictures grew, Chinese merchants became increasingly interested in venturing into film production. Hence the early 1920s witnessed a surge of short-lived, small scale independent production companies. Some film historians consider the period Chinese cinema's real dawn.¹¹ The production companies began to produce longer narrative films in 1921, consciously competing with Hollywood style feature-length imports for the domestic market. At the time, the Chinese Drama Research Association produced a plot driven stage adaptation, *Yuang Ruisheng*. The film, consciously ripping off headline news for popular appeal, turned out to be a huge hit, successfully breaking into the foreign-controlled theater, Olympic Cinema, for exhibition. The film's commercial success steered Chinese cinema towards producing pure entertainment rather than the socially responsible films advocated by the pioneers of Chinese cinema. Another popular feature produced in 1921 that further enforced the wave of commercial-driven entertainment features was *Beauty and Skeleton*. Filmmaker Guan Haifeng shrewdly selected a pre-sold commodity, a popular stage play, itself based on a sensational murder case involving sex and money, appropriated a Hollywood style detective plot structure, and spiced it up with Chinese martial arts.

5. China is catching up with Hollywood's big budget, high-tech blockbuster syndrome. According to an internet news service Lateline News (4/10/98), China has invested 26 million yuan (\$3 million) in developing special technology imported from the US to create natural disasters and wars on the screen with ease. A government research institute, Qinhua University and Beijing Film Studio were responsible for developing the technology. "Technically speaking, China will then have no problems in making movies like *Titanic*," the vice-director of the Film Industry Administration, Yang Buting, announced.

6. Film historians have divided earlier film-makers into roughly four periods: 1905-32, 1932-49, 1950-1960 and 1960-1980. The 5th generation is the first generation of filmmakers graduated from the Beijing Film Academy after the Cultural Revolution.

7. Ren's lack of capital for imports propelled him to try his hand at making his own films. The first film he made recorded a popular Beijing opera performed by a famous opera singer. Ren screened his filmed version of Beijing opera at a tea house style exhibition site.

8. Brodsky later sold his production business in Shanghai in 1912. He explained that the nationalistic sentiment was so strong among the Chinese in early 1910s that when a cowboy from one of his American films cocked his gun at the camera /audience on screen, the angry Chinese spectators shouted "white devil" and burned the theater. See Leyda's book *Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China*, p. 22.

9. Both Xingming and Huamei were short-lived. The outbreak of WWI soon cut off the companies' supply of film stocks, shutting them down for good. Film stocks were later imported to China from the US. WWI made it possible for Hollywood to replace Europe as the dominant force in the Chinese film market.

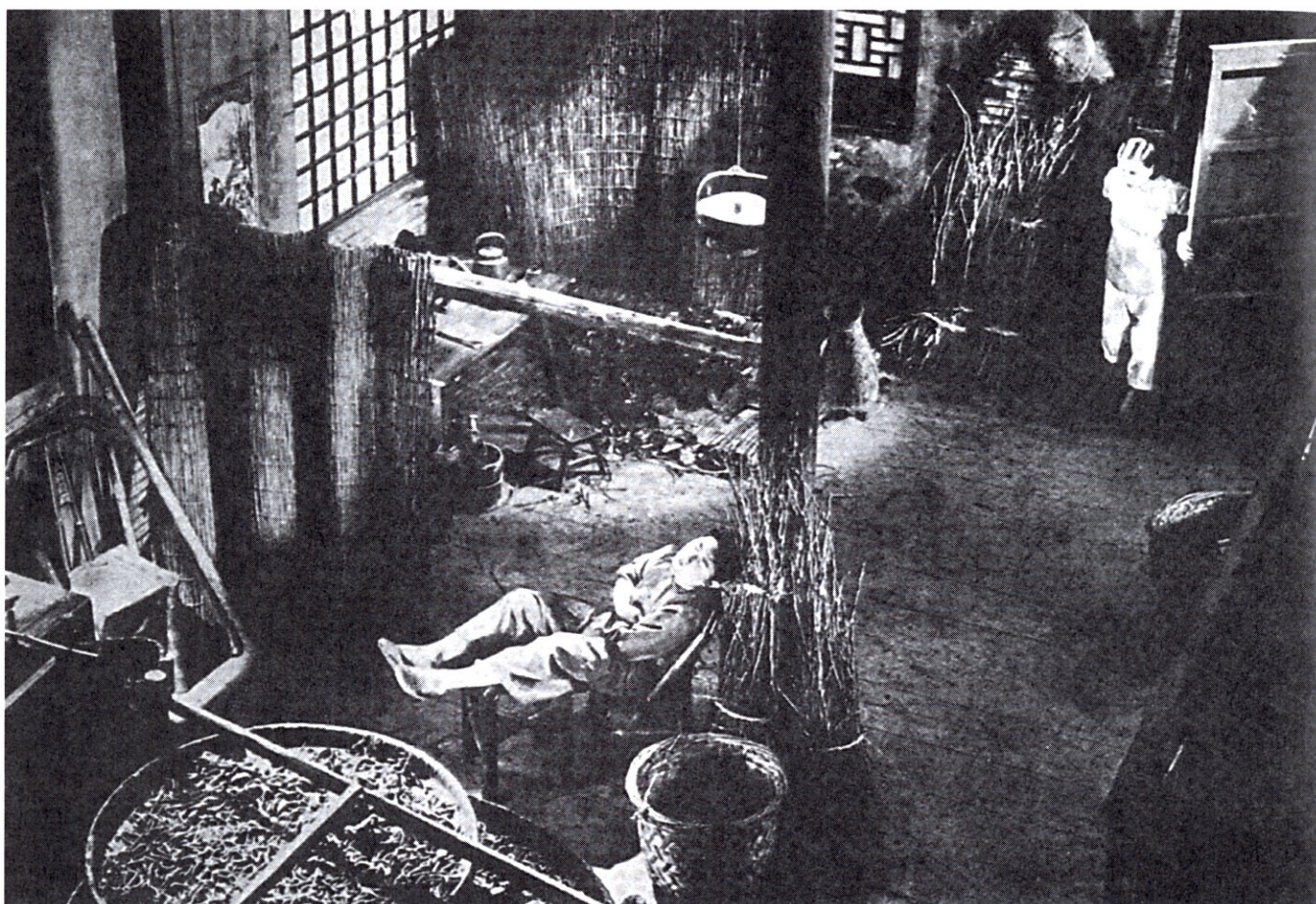
10. See Li Suyuan & Hu Jushan's book (1996) *The History of Chinese Cinema* (Beijing: China Film Press 1996), p. 49



Upper: Zhuangzhi Tests His Wife, 1913 (Huamei Productions)



Lower: Ruan Lingyu in *The Goddess*, 1934



Spring Silkworms, 1933
(Bright Star Productions)

Three Modern Girls, 1934
(United China Productions)



The early to mid 1920s witnessed Chinese filmmakers' conscious effort to consolidate capital and human resources in order to compete with Hollywood imports. The industrial consolidation reached its peak in 1927, drastically reducing the number of production companies. Consequently, three big production companies emerged, Bright Star, The Great China-Lily, and Heavenly One. The Chinese national film industry took its initial shape. Among the big three, Bright Star had the longest production history, the largest production capacity, and the best distribution network. Established in Shanghai in March 1922, Bright Star's early pictures were mainly social problem dramas that depicted the tragic lives of women and children in a patriarchal society. Bright Star strove to strike a balance between cinema's pedagogical and entertainment functions. Their melodramas, while catering to the popular taste, preached the importance of moral and popular education to a stronger China. Great China-Lily was formed in 1923, specializing in producing Westernized urban dramas. In terms of production scale and outputs, the company was second only to Bright Star from 1925 to 1929. It was bought out in 1930 by United China, a new production company.

Formed in Shanghai in 1925 by the financially adventurous yet ideologically conservative Shaw Brothers,¹² Heavenly One set out to produce films that promoted traditional Chinese ethics, morality, and civilization, countering Bright Star's westernized urban drama. The Chinese costume drama was the perfect vehicle for Shaw's aspiration. Heavenly One's cultivation of costume drama was also a shrewd marketing maneuver. Popular Chinese folklore, attacked during the May Fourth westernization movement, was making its way back on the literary scene in the late 1920s. Heavenly One's pictures were mostly derived from literary adaptations of folk tales, and the popularity of these tales guaranteed the marketability of its pictures. Costume drama became an attractive alternative to a public growing tired of formulaic social problem melodramas. Many production companies followed Heavenly One's suit, resulting in a wave of costume dramas.

A *coup d'état* staged the same year (1925) had many ramifications for Chinese cinema's first commercial surge. The Chinese Nationalist and Communist Parties joined forces to launch the "Northern Expedition" in 1926, aimed at replacing the reign of warlords with a unified central government. When the Expedition forces triumphantly reached Shanghai in the Spring of 1927, the Nationalist commander Chiang Kai Shek suddenly breached the pact with the Communist Party. Members of the Communist Party were purged and slaughtered and the nation came under Chiang's one party rule. The Nationalist government exerted a firm grip over the nation's ideology. In order to avoid government censorship, Chinese filmmakers further steered the industry away from its early obsession with pedagogical cinema, making strictly apolitical films for popular entertainment. Politics aside, on the economic front, the end of the Warlord Era and peaceful development under one party's rule brought more commercial opportunities for the film industry. The consolidation of

domestic transportation during and after the Northern Expedition boosted economic development and brought substantial foreign capital into China's coastal cities. The Chinese film industry, based in prosperous, cosmopolitan Shanghai, benefited from the new capital investment. 1927 to 1931 witnessed the first surge of commercial pictures in the history of Chinese cinema.¹³

The wave of entertainment pictures was an attempt to foster Chinese native production and exhibition so as to compete with Hollywood for China's domestic market. Though less successful getting into local production due to the cultural and linguistic barrier, foreign capital had actively monopolized the distribution and exhibition sectors in China. There were approximately 100 theaters in China in 1927, and the number reached 250 in 1930. Yet the rapid theater expansion was driven mostly by imports, much like film distribution and exhibition in today's China. Exhibition adhered to the classic two-tier colonial structure. While some crudely equipped theaters were built in the hinterlands and small towns, many well-equipped theaters were built in big cosmopolitan cities like Shanghai and Beijing. Of 250 theaters, only 50-60 showed Chinese films. Up-scale theaters all had exclusive contracts with Hollywood. Heavy fines were imposed if such theaters screened Chinese films. The fine was also applied to some middle-scale theaters.¹⁴ The popularity of imported films forced Chinese native productions to accept high exhibition fees and low ticket prices. Meanwhile, theaters were forced to pay 30% to 50% of their revenue to foreign distributors, leaving them little capital for circulation. Lack of exhibition opportunities impeded the circulation of capital for Chinese filmmakers and further reduced the quality of domestically made pictures.

Chinese film companies were keenly aware of the need to establish their own theater chains. Battles were waged against the Western monopoly over film distribution and exhibition. Bright Star took the lead in cultivating a market for domestic productions. The company established its own distribution network and built its own theater chains. Bright Star's Central Theater in Shanghai became a palace for domestic films. Bright Star also sought to buy out the foreign run networks, initiating co-operation with other companies to establish a united exhibition network, United Six Film Corporation, exclusively screening films made by the affiliated companies. Heavenly One was the only big studio that did not cooperate with United Six. Instead, Heavenly One was competing head to head with the United Six, followed by a few small production companies also specializing in costume dramas. United Six responded by publicly advocating developing national cinema with better quality, an unambiguous shot at Heavenly One's costume dramas, many of them cheap knock-offs of a successful formula.

11. *ibid.*

12. They later moved to Hong Kong and became the founding father(s) of the Hong Kong film industry.

13. The period ended abruptly with the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in the winter of 1931 and 1932.

14. Most of the small production companies were intimidated by the foreign controlled theaters, and only a few big studios, notably Bright Star and Heavenly One, owned small theater chains.



Years of Plenty, 1933
(Bright Star Productions)



Spring Dream in an Ancient City, 1930
(United China Productions)

Heavenly One's market share was larger than United Six at the time so United Six demanded that distribution companies contracted with it should not show films by Heavenly One. A fan magazine published from 1928 to 1929 promoted United Six's pictures. Heavenly One lost part of its market share in Shanghai as the result of the monopoly tactics exercised by United Six, but Heavenly One found a back door in South-East Asia, where it cultivated its own theaters. United Six's aggressive marketing policy alienated many production companies. Meanwhile, an internal power struggle eroded its financial strength, and it was dismantled in July 1929. United Six's former theater chains went their own ways, forming various small production companies for their fifteen minutes of fame and market share. The furious competition created chaos in domestic production and exhibition, renewing nationalistic sentiments that called for an integrated national film industry.

While institutional restructuring during the period was driven primarily by concern for the industry's financial survival, such consolidation was also urged by left-wing critics and filmmakers who aspired to a strong national cinema to serve the nation in crisis. The late 1920s saw a surge of discourse about the crisis of Chinese cinema concerning the withering emphasis on cinema's pedagogical function.¹⁵ While entertainment fare attracted the public to domestic productions, the pictures were sharply criticized for their lack of pedagogical value. Yet the competition with imports mandated the production of popular entertainment, since this was the only way to attract Chinese patrons — the only way to develop a Chinese national cinema, a path repeating itself in the current development of Chinese cinema. Nationalism and commercialism, however antagonistic, formed a united front during the period of domestic turmoil. United China, a late-

comer, became the leading production company in this united front.

Nationalism, Commercialism, and the Big Three

The United China Film Production and Printing Ltd. was formed in 1930, the outcome of a series of vertical and horizontal integrations initiated by Luo Mingyou, a patriotic theater owner. Luo's family connections with high power politicians in the Nationalist government and wealthy merchants in Hong Kong made him a formidable player. Luo ventured into the exhibition business in 1918 by investing his father's capital to build Zhen Guang theater in Beijing. He later formed Northern China Film Company in 1927 to expand his theater chain, and by 1930 his company was managing over twenty theaters spread across Northeast China.

Like most theaters at the time, Luo's also relied on imports to attract patrons. Luo, however, was not content with the situation, for he considered an "invasion of foreign culture"¹⁶ disgraceful and humiliating to the Chinese. The coming of sound granted him an opportunity to revive Chinese cinema.¹⁷ After the initial excitement and curiosity, Chinese audiences lost their interest in imported talkies because of the language barrier. Meanwhile, Hollywood had stopped exporting silent pictures, leaving many theaters hungry for material. Luo envisioned the inevitable demand for domestic pictures and decided to enter film production.

Twelve years of theater management experience made Luo aware of the problems facing Chinese cinema. Three problems he diagnosed were the low production, the separation of production, distribution, and exhibition, and the destructive competition among production companies.¹⁸ Born into a shrewd Hong Kong business family, Luo was familiar with the Western-style industrial/institutional practice and struc-

ture. He was the first industrial practitioner to realize the importance of the vertically and horizontally integrated institutional structure and practice that were responsible, for the most part, for Hollywood's global dominance. He courted production companies, including Great China-Lily, for a possible consolidation under the new name United China. With strong financial backing from his family and friends, he acquired shares of various companies by purchasing their equipment and signing contracts with them for exclusive screening of their films in his theater chains. He advocated constructive cooperation instead of destructive competition among domestic production companies. He also encouraged studios to support theaters showing Chinese films by supplying them with first-run quality films. Finally, he advised theater owners to consolidate their theater chains and to liquidate foreign-run theaters.

United China was officially established in March 1930, with its general manager's office in Hong Kong. A management branch was set up in Shanghai, overseeing three studios. United China's nationalistic aspirations attracted many of the top talents in Shanghai. Luo further consolidated theaters in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and North East China to establish a distribution-exhibition network. He also scouted locations in coastal cities for additional theaters. United China's fast ascendance soon made it an equal of Bright Star and Heavenly One, filling out the triple super-power structure of Chinese cinema during the period.

Cinema to Luo was first and foremost a vehicle for nationalistic pedagogy. United China produced more than ten silent pictures from 1930 to 1931, mostly socially conscious melodramas. Its debut *Spring Dream in an Ancient City*, a well-crafted social drama catering to better educated patrons, was an instant hit in 1930. It dealt with government corruption and moral decay, a refreshing alternative to the mainstream martial arts-ghost pictures. The film was also critical of Chinese intellectuals' complacency towards government corruption. The film's box-office during its premier in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Beijing equaled that of an average Chinese film's full run. It signaled the beginning of a revival of Chinese national cinema.

Influenced by Alexandre Dumas' *Camille* and *Seventh Heaven* (Frank Borzage, 1927), United China's second feature *Wild Grass Leisure Flowers* told a melodramatic story about the courtship between a wealthy young musician and a flower girl with singing talent. After many twists and turns, the young lovers, separated by the young man's family, eventually get together. Like *Camille*, *Wild Grass Leisure Flowers* was a "problem film", the middle class realistic drama addressing some contemporary ill and offering suggestions for its remedy. The film attacked the hypocrisy of Chinese society and championed its young lovers' pursuit of unprejudiced love. The film was a popular hit among urban youth



Chinese poster advertising the American film *Seventh Heaven*

15. See Dai Xiaolan (ed.) *Chinese Silent Cinemas*

16. Li & Hu *The History of Chinese Cinema* (1996), p. 198.

17. The first sound film was introduced to China from the US in 1929.

18. Li & Hu, p. 199.

19. The actress in both films was Ruan Linyu, a popular Chinese screen icon at the time.

and intellectuals, demonstrating the ability of quality domestic films to compete with the imports.¹⁹

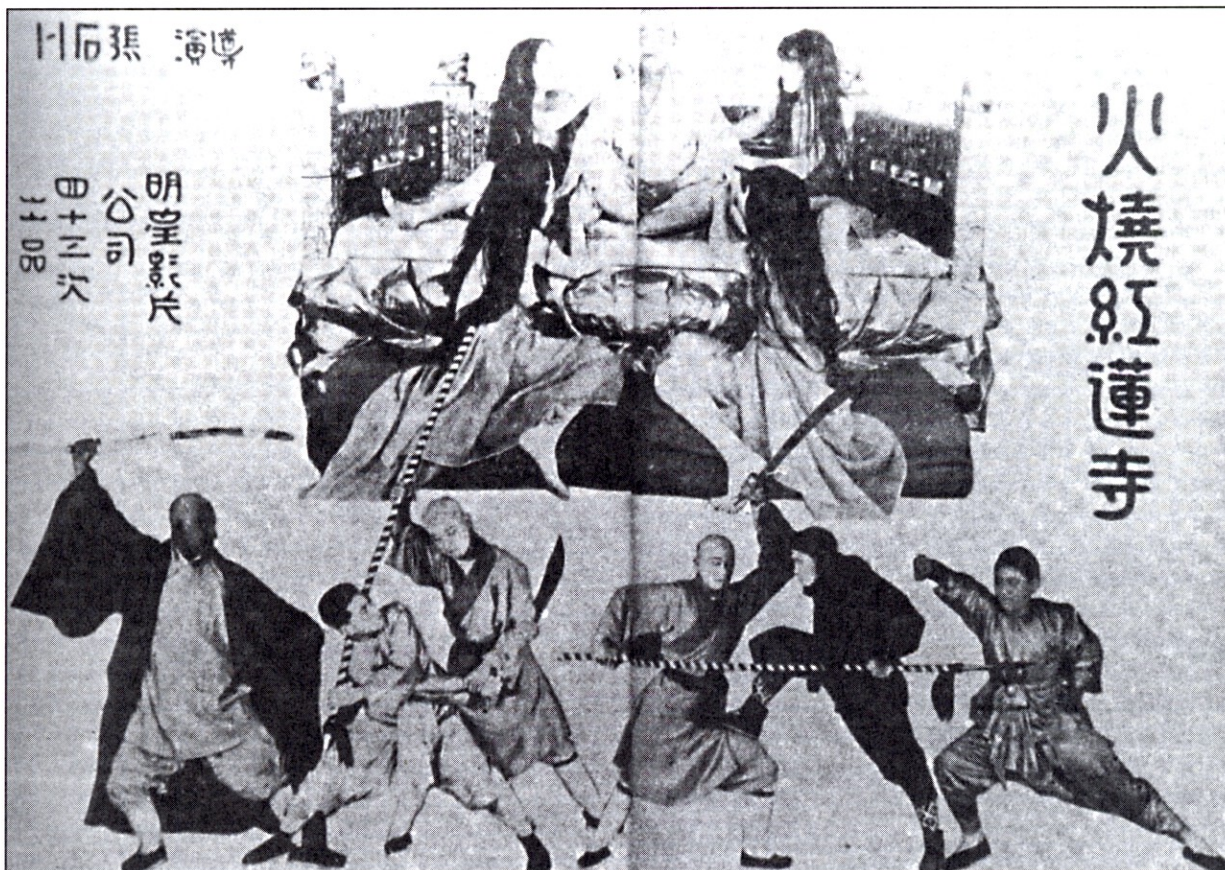
From 1932 to 1934, United China went through a period of crisis brought on by both external and internal pressures. Externally, the Japanese invasion interrupted Luo's vertically integrated operation. Luo's theater chain in Northeast China was lost to Japan's occupation, and his studio in Shanghai was badly damaged by Japanese bombing. Domestically, the Chinese economy went through a difficult period, draining financial resources for film production. Internationally, the world economy was going through a similar slump, leaving Luo's overseas' connections useless. Meanwhile, United China had some internal management problems that further contributed to the company's financial crisis.²⁰ Emphasis on quality pictures further slowed down the production and raised budgets. The discrepancy between quality and quantity put United China in a disadvantaged position in competing with the big two's popular entertainment pictures.

Parallel to United China's nationalistic practice during the period was Chinese cinema's first entertainment wave led by Heavenly One and Bright Star. The popular domestic genres from 1927 to 1931 were not social problem and family melodramas but costume and martial art-ghost dramas, with Heavenly One specializing in the former and Bright Star the

latter. More than half of the films of the period fit one of these popular genres, and all the financial successes came from this group, except for the first Chinese sound novelties. Grouped together by Leyda²¹ as "the swordplay-cum-mystery" or the Chinese version of the American Western, the popular genres often featured heroes of "some undefined period in the past, a synthesis of a medieval knight-errant, a Japanese samurai, the French *Fantomas*, and old reliable Robin Hood."²² Violent swordplay intertwined with romance has become the trademark of such genres perpetuated by Hong Kong's contemporary kungfu movies. The costume-martial art-ghost dramas became China's first indigenous genre films, actively and effectively competing with Hollywood imports.

Launched in 1926 by Heavenly One, the costume drama became the dominant commercial genre within two years. Over two-thirds of domestic films made between 1927 to 1928 were costume dramas, and seventeen studios were involved in churning them out. The Nationalist Party's tight ideological grip took the political edge off mainstream Chinese cinema after the Northern Expedition, and the Shanghai based, fashion-conscious urban drama had lost its novelty by the mid 1920s, causing the exhausted filmmakers to look to Chinese literary classics and folklore for inspiration. Such a commercial maneuver nicely tapped into the

Poster advertising Zhang Shichuan's *Burning the Red Lotus Temple*, 1928 (Bright Star Productions)



nationalistic sentiment of the period. Heavenly One actively utilized national pride in Chinese cultural heritage to promote its newly discovered Chinese classics in order to counter the Westernized urban dramas. According to the Chinese Film Year Book published in 1934, the founder of Heavenly One considered Chinese popular literature the literature of the people, more representative of the voices of the public than classics promoted as Chinese official literature. Early costume dramas were mostly adapted from Tanchi, a popular vocal entertainment format that chanted folk tales about tragic love in a repressive feudal society. The costume drama soon ventured into literary adaptations of Chinese mythology, classic novels and poems, and even period dramas based on officially recorded history.

The ascendancy of the costume drama was driven partly by nationalism but more by commercial interest. Well-off and better educated Chinese patrons frequented only upper scale theaters dominated by Hollywood films, leaving the cheaper theaters and Chinese films to poor, less educated urban dwellers. Chinese films mostly catered to such socially and economically disadvantaged patrons. The poor and the less educated grew up listening to Chinese operas and Tanchi reciting ancient Chinese myths and folklore. Screen renditions of the popular vocal narratives shrewdly catered to the taste of this audience segment. Costume Drama was also marketable among the Chinese residing in Southeast Asia since it gratified the need of overseas Chinese to reconnect with their cultural roots. Meanwhile, the colonial cultural policies in Southeast Asia welcomed Heavenly One's costume dramas, for such films bore no political relevance to colonial control, let alone challenging its legitimacy. Commercial incentives aside, the costume drama opened up an opportunity for Chinese national cinema to move from merely imitating Hollywood to exploring China's own narrative heritage. It encouraged native filmmakers to explore the possibility of reconciling imported cinema technology with a culturally specific narrative. The Chinese classics and folk tales delivered via Western celluloid technology thus created a habit for consuming domestic pictures and even made such consumption fashionable.

Sprouting from the outcry for a culturally constructive national cinema, costume dramas paradoxically became the first wave of Chinese entertainment cinema, an unintended aberration of the socially conscious cinema advocated by nationalistic-minded film makers and cultural critics. This called attention to the duality of cinema as an art form with cultural significance and an entertainment form with commercial value. The tension between art and commerce provoked much discussion among Chinese filmmakers of the time. The theme is being revisited now by contemporary Chinese filmmakers who have been facing the same dilemma since economic reform reached their industry in the mid 1980s. When commercialism, privileging cinema's entertainment value, helped the fledgling Chinese cinema retain its market share and therefore realize its nationalistic aspiration, nationalism, privileging cinema's pedagogical function, ultimately demanded quality films with cultural significance.

The quality, or production values of costume drama, was harmed, however, by the proliferation of cheap imitations. The profitability of costume dramas attracted many small-scale production companies whose lack of capital, talent, and technology resulted in mindless imitations with neither originality nor production quality. These tarnished the reputation of domestic pictures and steered middle class patrons away, renewing concern about the future of Chinese cinema. The outcry for elevating national pictures, while granting an opportunity for the ascendancy of costume drama, soon contributed to its demise.

At the midst of the costume drama craze, martial art-ghost pictures fought for their own niche market, and the demise of the former paved the way for the ascendancy of the latter. The dominance of entertainment films led by costume drama had marginalized more socially and artistically responsible films. The decline of costume drama propelled the studios to seek yet another commercially viable entertainment formula. Martial arts and ghost stories were very popular in China during the 1920s, making them lucrative pre-sold commodities for film adaptation. New special effects technology also made the production of such physically demanding films possible. Like the preceding costume drama, the cultivation of the martial art-ghost genre was the result of commercial imperatives, yet the growing nationalistic sentiment was utilized to justify this trend.

The early martial arts films depicted the lives of kungfu legends. The kungfu genre was uniquely Chinese, tapping into the general public's nationalistic fantasy of a superhero who would save the nation in trouble. Ghost stories were added to give kungfu masters supernatural power. With its 1928 premier of *Burning the Red Lotus Temple*, Bright Star became a leader in martial art-ghost films. On the verge of bankruptcy, Bright Star was anxious to tap into the kungfu trend. Previously specializing in urban melodrama, the company lacked qualified kungfu actors. Instead it repackaged its popular leading lady, Butterfly, famous for her roles in melodramas, as a female kungfu master in *Burning the Red Lotus Temple*, granting her supernatural power to cover for her lack of martial arts training. The film turned out to be a huge hit, thanks more to Butterfly's physical beauty than ability. *Burning the Red Lotus Temple* and its 18 sequels generated enough revenue for the company not only to recover from its financial loss but to expand its production operation.²³ Bright Star came out of this period of reconfiguration and restructuring in a stronger position. Its number one position would not be challenged until late 1930 and early 1931 by United

20. United China had overextended itself building new studios. The problems of low efficiency and overbudget at its formerly independent studios persisted after the formation of United China. And Luo's Hong Kong distribution company was not making a profit either.

21. Leyda, p. 61

22. *ibid.*

23. The Company started to expand its production in the second half of 1928 by moving to a larger lot and upgrading production facilities. The company's organization also went through a series of restructurings. It streamlined its production operation by establishing departments of directing, promotion, animation, and technical support. It also recruited new talent for writing, directing, and acting.

China. Bright Star competed with United China by venturing into sound production, returning to quality pictures, consolidating its distribution-exhibition network, and cultivating its star system. The production of martial art-ghost films reached its height in 1929, with an annual output of 85 pictures. The mindless replication of the formula by small scale production companies once again resulted in an oversaturated market.

The Japanese invasion in 1931 interrupted Chinese cinema's commercial trend. Filmmakers could no longer indulge in making pictures with no direct political and social relevance. The next phase in the development of Chinese national cinema was a famous left-wing cinematic movement that advocated social realist cinema. Led by underground Communist party members, a left-wing film group started their systematic penetration into the financially ailing film industry. United China was one of the studios infiltrated by the film team, which introduced to Chinese cinema the theme of class struggle. The politically progressive urban dramas produced by United China during this period, such as *Three Modern Girls* and *New Woman*, would become Chinese classics. The Nationalist controlled government tried to crack down on Communist influence and threatened to sabotage any production that promoted class difference. Luo tried to distance United China from the left-wingers. Yet left-wing filmmakers within United China continued their progressive filmmaking. United China hence paradoxically produced both Shanghai's most reactionary and most progressive films from 1934 to 1935.²⁴ United China stopped production after the outbreak of war against Japan in 1937.²⁵

Many filmmakers moved inland to join the anti-Japanese forces. Cinema's pedagogical function was restored during the war against Japan and later during the Chinese civil war. The pedagogical function was at times pushed to extremes, completely neglecting cinema's entertainment value. After the Chinese Communist Party took over Mainland China, film became part of the state controlled propaganda machine, subsidized by the central government and producing ideologically motivated films. Cinema served only nationalism, as commercialism was condemned as bourgeois ideology. It was not until the 1980s when China's economic reform policy reached the cultural industries that the tension between nationalism and commercialism would re-emerge.

Conclusions

Chinese cinema had its slow and difficult start under the shadow of Hollywood and European imports, from the founding of the first Chinese studio, Bright Star, in 1922 to the Northern Expedition in 1926. A relatively smooth development ensued after the Nationalists' *coup d'état* in 1927 and before the Japanese invasion in 1931. Provoked by the humiliation of a domestic film industry unable to compete with imports, the pioneers of Chinese cinema consciously adopted Hollywood's vertically integrated institutional structure and horizontally integrated marketing practice. The outcry for a stronger Chinese national cinema paved the way for Chinese cinema's first entertainment surge. Heavenly One and Bright Star actively cultivated their respective signature genres to

attract patrons to native productions. Their entertainment pictures combining imported technology and local Chinese mythology created demand for Chinese films. The third big studio, the latecomer United China, while less interested in riding the entertainment wave, led the way in reviving Chinese national cinema.²⁶ United China's contribution to the development of Chinese cinema came from the company's active role in appropriating the Hollywood model for restructuring the Chinese film industry as well as its production of more socially conscious films propelled by its nationalistic aspiration.

The commercialization of Chinese cinema as a way to boost domestic production, distribution, and exhibition, eventually clashed with nationalist sentiments that asked for films capable of enlightening the masses in order to serve the nation. The fitful relationship between commercialism and nationalism during the twenties and thirties is foregrounded again six decades later by China's economic reform. Chinese cinema's current restructuring has followed the same path, adopting Hollywood's practice to counter Hollywood. In April 1998, Chinese president Jiang Zemin publicly endorsed *Titanic*, Hollywood's latest global blockbuster, when the film opened in China. Jiang suggested that the film can give China's beleaguered film industry some insight into moviemaking and capitalist competition with western imports. A domestic capitalism is clearly encouraged to counter the Hollywood-led global capitalism in film producing and marketing.²⁷

The concern for a market share has renewed a felicitous partnership between nationalism and commercialism. Yet it remains to be seen whether the honeymoon will once again turn sour after Chinese cinema survives its current crisis. In his endorsement of *Titanic*, Jiang differentiated between capitalist marketing strategy and capitalist ideology. The Chinese film industry was called upon to appropriate the Hollywood paradigm to make films with Chinese cultural value. The future formation of Chinese cinema will ultimately depend on the outcome of China's overall economic and political restructuring. Whether Chinese nationalism unconditionally embraces commercialism will have a profound impact not only on Chinese cinema but on Chinese culture in general.

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24. Leyda, p. 93.

25. During its eight year history, United China produced a total of ninety-four features, some of the best films in Chinese history.

26. Another patriotic company was Great Wall, a small production company formed by overseas Chinese and employed Chinese students returning from the US. It issued a letter to the Chinese Government, advocating the banning of foreign films that harmed the image of the Chinese. It also actively sought a united front with other domestic production companies to develop Chinese national cinema.

27. See the Wall Street Journal Interactive Edition (April 14, 1998).

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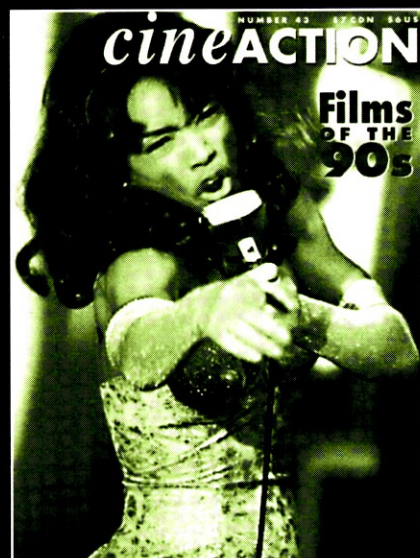
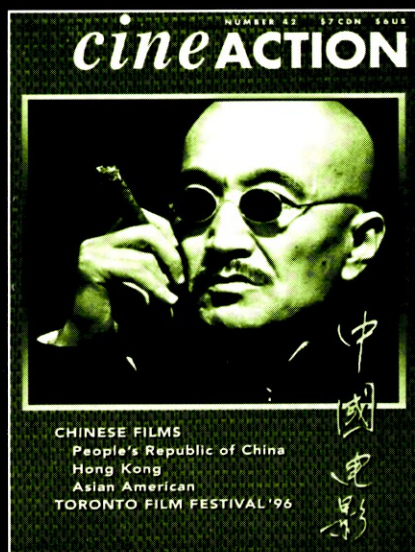
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